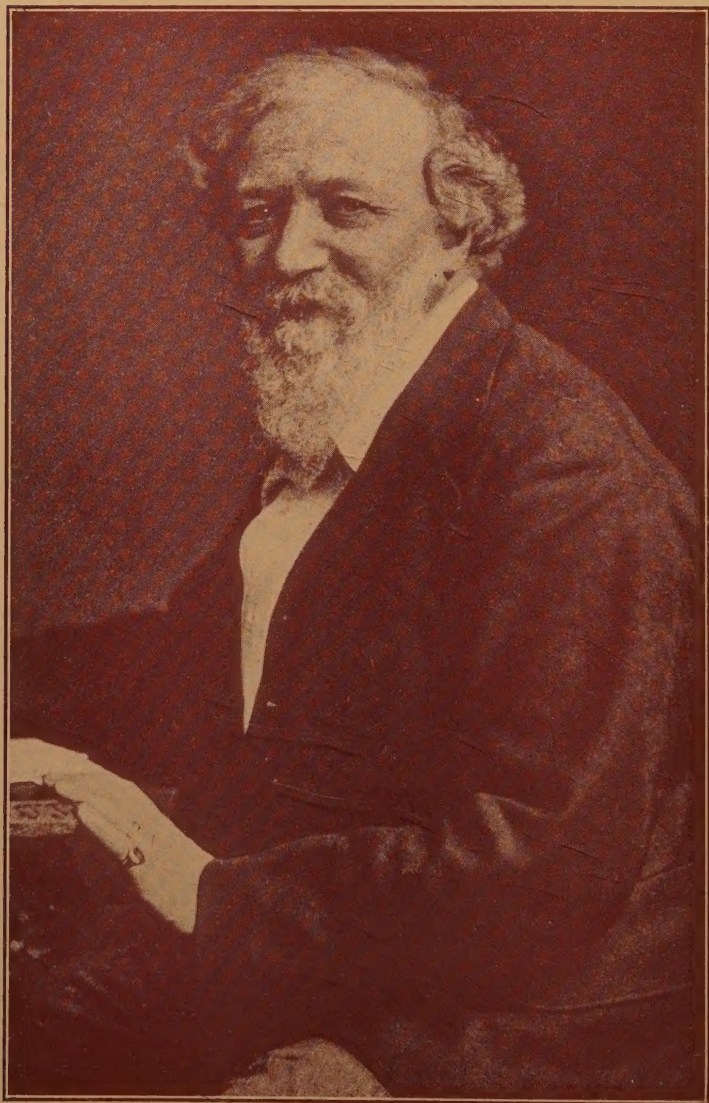




DISCARD

POMPILIA AND HER POET



POMPILIA'S POET

POMPILIA AND HER POET

BY

HARRIET GAYLORD



WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

CHARLES HANSON TOWNE

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HARRIET GAYLORD

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An enthusiastic study of the Brownings
which, as an introduction to these poets, will
be especially valuable to young people. The
first part is a résumé of the story of "*The
ring and the book*", the second part a short
account of the lives of the two poets.

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TO MY BROTHER

FOREWORD

This book has been written not for learned Browning scholars, but in the hope of making the Poet, his brain-child Pompilia, and his wife and fellow poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, vivid human beings—yes, even stimulating and enjoyable friends to those who might not otherwise find companionship and inspiration in the lives and life-works of these two gifted poets.

HARRIET GAYLORD

CONTENTS

PART ONE

POMPILIA

I INSPIRATION

II INCEPTION AND ORCHESTRATION

III THE WHITE SOUL

IV THE SHORN LAMB

V BROKEN ON THE WHEEL

VI THE GREAT HAZARD

VII CATASTROPHE

VIII "NO WORK BEGUN SHALL EVER PAUSE FOR DEATH"

IX JUDGMENT

CONTENTS

PART TWO

THE POET

X
HEREDITY

XI
GOD'S LAMP

XII
YOUNG WINGS

XIII
PREDESTINATION

XIV
LYRIC LOVE

XV
CONFLUENCE

XVI
EPITHALAMIUM

XVII
MEASURELESS CONTENT

XVIII
HARVEST

XIX
EVENING

XX
FINIS CORONAT OPUS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

POMPILIA'S POET	Frontispiece
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING IN EARLY YOUTH .	Page 111
ROBERT BROWNING, 1859	Page 116
<i>From a Drawing by Field Talfourd.</i>	
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING	Page 126
<i>From a Drawing by Field Talfourd.</i>	
PORTRAIT OF ROBERT BROWNING WITH THE OLD SQUARE YELLOW BOOK	Page 172
REZZONICO PALACE	Page 184

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INTRODUCTION

There is a story of Robert Browning which I have always liked. It seems that once when he was attending an afternoon reception an eager young lady approached him and gushed: "Oh, Mr. Browning, I am happy to have met you at last! For now you can explain to me a certain passage in *Pippa Passes*." And she proceeded to quote the lines which had confused her. Whereupon the great poet leaned down, patted her on the head and said: "My dear young lady, don't ask me—ask the Browning Society."

Geniuses, after all, are human beings. And it is as a human being that Miss Gaylord approaches one of the greatest poets of all time; and so, too, she approaches Mrs. Browning.

The love story of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett is one of the memorable romances of history. It is filled with beauty; it is saturated with that divine essence which causes lesser mortals to realize, however vaguely or wonderingly or avidly, that perfect love can sometimes stoop to this baser earth and reveal its flaming, heavenly power. Miss Gaylord comes to this story reverently and retells it with the enthusiasm of a pilgrim home from his travels who has looked on beauty and would have us see it too. But always she emphasizes the human aspect of the Brownings and causes us to view them as warm, pulsating mortals, not as mere pillar-saints placed in some dim cathedral niche. Portions of their glowing love letters are given to us again; those letters which drip with the honey of love and devotion which today, alas! seems to be as *démodé* as the stage coach. Her volume will help to restore some of our lost faith, and surely it will revive an interest in two poets whose work can never perish, even in this age of machinery and materialism.

CHARLES HANSON TOWNE

PART ONE

POMPILIA

"It was not given to Pompilia to know much,
Speak much, to write a book, to move mankind,
Be memorized by who records my time.
Yet if in purity and patience, if
In faith held fast despite the plucking fiend,
Safe like the signet stone with the new name
That saints are known by;—if in right returned
For wrong, most pardon for worst injury,
If there be any virtue, any praise,—
Then will this woman child have proved—who knows?—
Just the one prize vouchsafed unworthy me,
Seven years a gardener of the untoward ground
I till My flower,
My rose, I gather for the breast of God."

THE POPE

INSPIRATION

POMPILIA had the good fortune to be created by one of the world's great lovers. Few men have ever lived who have explored so deeply into the human heart as did Robert Browning, and the heart of the most rarely beautiful of women was to him an open book. Early in January, 1845, he finished reading the latest poems of Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett, and in his first letter to her, dated January tenth, he declared:

"I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett. . . . Into me has it gone and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, not a flower of which but took root and grew. . . . I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart, and I love you, too."

From that time on through their flawless marriage to the moment sixteen years later when his

" Lyric Love, half angel and half bird, . . .
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,"

he passionately adored and understood to the depths of her rare nature, a woman frail in body as the wren but in heart and spirit as dauntless as the eagle. From that first letter of his on to her last to him, dated September nineteenth, 1846, they exchanged an amazing, soul-revealing myriad of letters. Afterward there was no need to write for they were never separated. By the decision of their son, Mr. Robert Barrett Browning, after his father's death in 1889, these letters have been preserved for a world that could ill have afforded to miss the beauty enshrined in the heart outpourings of these gifted souls.

From these eleven hundred and thirty-six closely printed pages, from Robert Browning's most inspired lyrics, from

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's unsurpassed series of love sonnets which she slightly disguised under the title, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, we gain some measure of appreciation of the incomparably close interlocking of their hearts and minds. It was warm, beautiful wisdom Robert Browning culled from the lovely soul of his frail, retiring wife whose last letter to him, written on the night she left her father's house to join her life to his, ended with these words:

"I begin to think there are none so bold as the timid
when they are fairly aroused."

In the first agonizing years after his wife's death when the poet had to learn to walk alone, he created another woman,

".....half angel and half bird
And all a wonder and a wild desire."

What matter if he hid that soul in an obscure Italian child-wife? Timid Pompilia also had the eagle heart and soul when once she was aroused. Browning etched her into his lofty epic in the spirit of that standard he himself had set for the poet, that he must "see as God sees", and so has given the world a portrait clear cut in cameo beauty and possessing the vivid personal reality which makes Hamlet, the gentle Vicar of Wakefield, Cyrano de Bergerac, Jean Valjean, and other creations of gifted imagination, more authentic human beings than many whom we know in the flesh.

To a friend late in his life Robert Browning spoke quite definitely concerning the influence the memory of his wife exerted in the creation of Pompilia:

"I am not sorry now to have lived so long after she went away, but I confess to you that all my types of women were made beautiful and blessed by my perfect knowledge of one woman's pure soul. Had I never known Elizabeth, I never could have written *The Ring and the Book*."

INSPIRATION

His friend and biographer, Mrs. Sutherland Orr, also confirms what must be convincingly evident to all close students of Browning's life and poetry:

"Mrs. Browning's spiritual presence was more than a presiding memory in the heart. I am convinced that it entered largely into the conception of Pompilia. It takes, however, both the throbbing humanity of Balaustion and the saintly glory of Pompilia to express fully the nature of Elizabeth Barrett Browning as she appeared to her husband."

Out of the abundance of the heart the pen wrote to produce work worthy of her memory in the hope "that the flower of it will be put into Her hand somehow," even as he had placed in her living hand the record of their perfect union immortalized in *By the Fireside*:

"My own, see where the years conduct!
At first 'twas something our two souls
Should mix as mists do; each is sucked
In each now: on the new stream rolls,
Whatever rocks obstruct.

"Think, when our one soul understands
The Great Word which makes all things new,
When earth breaks up and heaven expands,
How will the change strike me and you
In the house not made with hands?

"Oh, I must feel your brain prompt mine,
Your heart anticipate my heart;
You must be just before, in fine,
See and make me see, for your part,
New depths of the divine."

Fortunately such adventures of the spirit as Robert Browning knew within the four walls of his home are the meat and drink of inspiration and imagination. Out of such sustenance comes a Hamlet or a Pompilia.

INCEPTION AND ORCHESTRATION

ON a June day in 1860, almost exactly a year before his wife's death, Browning received the initial impulse which was to lie fallow for four years, burgeon for four more, then flower into the publication of his *magnum opus* in 1868.

To every casehardened and omnivorous reader, books are an irresistible magnet, and from his first years in a home whose walls were lined with the literary treasures of the ages, Robert Browning sighted book stalls on the street as instinctively as a bird dog points. On this especial June day, either by chance or in the hope of finding a worth while book, he directed his steps as he walked through the streets of Florence toward the picturesque Square of San Lorenzo, flanked on one side by that old home of the Medici, Riccardi Palazzo, and on the other by the church which gave its name to the square. Possibly he had many times before picked up books on the barrows scattered here and there, but he sets this especial day apart by saying:

" a Hand
Always above my shoulder, pushed me once
Across a square in Florence, crammed with booths,
Buzzing and blaze, noontide and market time."

Not only books were on these barrows, but all sorts of trumpery and tawdy baits to lure the unwary. Browning made his way among old chipped mirrors, sconces, bronze angel-heads, heaps of semi-precious stones, conch shells, drawings, brown-etched prints, and formerly proud old tapestries now fit only to be made into:

" a mat to save bare feet
Treading the chill scagliola bedward."

Suddenly he sighted five books propped up on a booth on the steps of the old Palace. Hurrying across he ex-

INCEPTION AND ORCHESTRATION

amined the titles avidly, drew out one, "a square old yellow book", and opened it, agog with the detective instinct he had inherited from a father who would neglect his meals any day to dig into crime stories and work out his own solution of murder mysteries. The title of this shabby old book promised fascinating entertainment to the pseudo detective:

".....A ROMAN MURDER CASE:

Position of the entire criminal cause

Of Guido Franceschini, nobleman,

With certain Four the cutthroats in his pay,

Tried, all five, and found guilty and put to death

By heading or hanging as befitted ranks,

At Rome on February Twenty Two,

Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight."

"Stall!" cried Browning, so eager for possession that he quite forgot the customary etiquette and paid the first price named, giving the lord of the barrow no chance to extract full relish from the joy of barter. One lira Italian—at that time eight pence English or sixteen cents American currency—purchased a masterpiece in embryo. The eager poet opened the book and passed on, leaving the astonished vendor fingering the coin, hardly knowing whether to exult at an unexpected profit or to feel outraged at the loss of a chance to achieve a financial victory through the eloquence of his facile tongue.

Browning strolled over to the statue of "John of the Black Bands", which dominated the square, and leaned for a few moments against the railing, eagerly turning the ancient pages of the book:

"Small-quarto size, part print, part manuscript:

A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact

Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,

And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since."

Presently he found his attention distracted by the jabbering market-men and thick-ankled girls, so he walked on, still reading intently:

POMPILIA AND HER POET

".....though my path grew perilous
Between the outspread straw-work, piles of plait
Soon to be flapping, each o'er two black eyes
And swathe of Tuscan hair, on festas fine.
Through fire-irons, tribes of tongs, shovels in sheaves,
Skeleton bedsteads, wardrobe drawers a-gape,
Rows of tall slim brass lamps with dangling gear,—
And worse, cast clothes a-sweetening in the sun:
None of them took my eye from off my prize.
Still read I on, from written title-page
To written index, on through street and street,
At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at the Bridge;
Till, by the time I stood at home again
In Casa Guidi by Felice Church,
Under the doorway where the black begins
With the first stone-slab of the staircase cold,
I had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth
Gathered together, bound up in this book,
Print three-fifths, written supplement the rest."

The book was written:

".....in a Latin cramp enough
When the law had her eloquence to launch,
But interfilleted with Italian streaks
When testimony stooped to mother-tongue."

The entire law case was expounded in the book, "fanciless fact". First came all the pleading on both sides, documents which were printed in the Apostolic Chamber and submitted to the Governor of Rome. Evidence taken in the Hall of Justice followed, first the pleadings of the Public Prosecutor and then the defense of the Patron of the Poor. Next came the verdict of the court, sentencing Guido and his companions to death for the murder of the Comparini family. But Guido had a last resort. In his youth he had taken some minor orders in the Church and to her he made a final appeal. The wise old Pope carefully reviewed the case, then wrote an order confirming the sentence and decreeing that the criminals be executed on the following day. This order, included in the book and written "in his

INCEPTION AND ORCHESTRATION

no such infirm hand," was followed by four letters sent to clients in Florence after the execution. A copy of the verdict of the court six months later ordering that the guardian of Pompilia's child be freed from all molestation in executing her will, ended the "square old yellow book".

These were the cold hard facts which kept Rome a-quiver with excitement for a while, then passed into an oblivion which undoubtedly would have been permanent had not the "Hand always above his shoulder" pushed Robert Browning that June day into the Square of San Lorenzo. Great events and inventions, great accomplishments, salvation or catastrophe often hang on just such slender threads of chance.

It is easy to imagine the buoyant enthusiasm with which Browning entered his home that afternoon, and how eagerly he discussed his discovery that night with his wife over their supper of grapes and chestnuts. He must have read much of it aloud before he closed the book and laid it on the cream colored agate shelf at the base of the high mirror with tarnished frame where his elbow had rested as he read. Then he turned away:

".....to free myself and find the world,
And stepped out on the narrow terrace, built
Over the street and opposite the church,
And paced its lozenge-brickwork sprinkled cool;
Because Felice-church-side stretched, aglow
Through each square window fringed for festival,
Whence came the clear voice of the cloistered ones
Chanting a chant made for midsummer nights—
I know not what particular praise of God,
It always came and went with June. Beneath
In the street, quick shown by openings of the sky
When flame fell silently from cloud to cloud,
Richer than that gold snow Jove rained on Rhodes,
The townsmen walked by twos and threes and talked,
Drinking the blackness in default of air."

Gradually the poet lost sense of time and place as his imagination soared free in the fever of creation. He felt

POMPILIA AND HER POET

his way out of the Roman Gate to the Roman Road, then south to Arezzo where he visioned the gloomy old stone castle of the Franceschini and the tortures of the child-bride. On his fancy travelled to the mean inn of Castelnova where Pompilia and her rescuer paused so disastrously; then on with the prisoners to Rome and the tragic dénouement. Step by step he filled in the bare facts of the story with his superb imagination, clothed the skeleton actors of the tragedy with flesh and blood, endowed them with souls and fitted them to the roles they must play in his creation. Before he left them that night they lived, as did the dead man on whom Elisha of old had stretched himself in benison and resurrection, lived because Browning had "fused his live soul with that inert stuff".

"A spirit leaps and laughs through every limb,
And lights my eye and lifts me by the hair,
Letting me have my will with these."

That autumn when the Brownings went to Rome the poet tried to discover further data. Everywhere he met with bland indifference and the advice not to waste his time since he would inevitably end where he began. Of course, he was told, the French had burned all records. Besides, might not his story tell against the Church?

"'Quite otherwise this time,' submitted I;
'Clean for the Church and dead against the world,
The flesh and the devil, does it tell for once'."

Plainly nothing was to be gathered in Rome. He had the crude story. From it he must rear a palace of music, a noble orchestration of inert stuff into passion which would leave the ground "to lose itself in the sky". Let the whole thing rest for a time, said Browning, perhaps definitely, or perhaps the story gradually slipped into his subconscious mind because all conscious thought and emotion during the last year his angel spent in his home were intent on trying to hold back her flight.

Four years later in the library of his home in Warwick

INCEPTION AND ORCHESTRATION

Crescent, London, the Hand one morning again pushed him across to the shelf where the shabby old book was patiently awaiting his alchemy. As he opened it and read, the dead sprang into life once more, into the life he had imparted to their dry bones that evening on the terrace in Florence. They were ready—ready and waiting for orchestration into his epic. Guido, the blackhearted; Pompilia of the white soul; Giuseppe Caponsacchi, the handsome young priest; the Pope, “far in readiness for God”—these gripped the poet so tenaciously that for the next four years they held almost unceasing sway in his heart and brain.

Little by little there was a subtle hallowing of his conception of Pompilia into the spiritual embodiment of her at the shrine of whose memory the poet unremittingly worshipped. As his angel had hallowed his life, his every thought, so must Pompilia hallow those lives that touched her own; so must she change the gay young priest into the soldier saint; so in his death hour must Guido call out for salvation from the clean soul he had never been able to smirch with his blackness; so must the noble Pope see in Pompilia:

“.....this gift of God who showed for once
How He would have the world go white.”

All these things must come to pass, not because Pompilia consciously tried to uplift, to whiten, but by the simple fact of her being just what she was.

Twelve cantos Browning planned to write and nine times was the story to be repeated with different facets reflecting the individuality of the teller of each tale. One evening when surrounded by a group of friends he related a simple incident; then asked each to repeat it and give his own interpretation. The difference in the reactions to the incident and even in the repetition itself made him laugh triumphantly. Just so was he planning to tell the old murder story in a series of dramatic monologues, each differing from the other and none of the nine giving the complete story. That must be lifted out from all the monologues

POMPILIA AND HER POET

point by point, rejecting the false, selecting the true, even as the Court of Rome and Pope Innocent the Twelfth lifted out the truth before they could render judgment.

His introductory canto he would call "The Ring and the Book", and in it tell how he came to choose the theme and plan the story. The next three cantos would be devoted to the gossip of Rome. Half Rome would argue that a nobleman could do no wrong, paint Guido white and Pompilia black. The Other Half Rome would reverse the process. *Tertium Quid* would solemnly expound the fluctuating judgments of the certain third from both parties who chose to sit on the fence so it would be easy to jump either way. Then would follow the stories of Guido, of Caponsacchi, of Pompilia. After these were finished, advocates would sum up both sides. Next the Pope would give his version and pronounce judgment, after which the condemned Guido would tell a different story of sullen defiance on the night of his execution. The twelfth canto, called "The Book and the Ring", would set forth the letters written in the old book and bring his poem to conclusion.

Just when Browning decided on the title for his great work is uncertain. Here, too, the inspiration came indirectly from his wife. She always wore an embossed ring of Etruscan gold wrought by the famous goldsmith, Castellani. After her death her husband wore it on his watch-chain, and one day he reflected on the fact that goldsmiths found the gold of Etruria too soft, too pure to be malleable and therefore had first of all to mix it with alloy to make a combination hard enough to be filed and hammered into beauty. Finally a spurt of the right sort of fiery acid would draw out the alloy, leaving the ring pure gold.

So he would take this story, dig out the grains of truth, assay it and prove it gold he could use. Then he would mix his fancy with this gold so it would quicken the inert stuff to malleability in his hand. When the epic should be finished, let the public cast fancy aside and find the pure gold of human truth. *The Ring and the Book* should be his title.

INCEPTION AND ORCHESTRATION

But a ring must have a "posy," a dedication. His heart yearned upward, and the posy winged its flight!

"O lyric Love, half angel and half bird,
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—
Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—
Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—
When the first summons from the darkling earth
Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue
And bared them of the glory—to drop down,
To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—
This is the same voice: can thy soul know change?
Hail then, and harken from the realms of help!
Never may I commence my song, my due
To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
That still, despite the distance and the dark,
What was, again may be; some interchange
Of grace, some splendor, once thy very thought,
Some benediction anciently thy smile:
—Never conclude, but raising hand and head
Thither where eyes that cannot reach, yet yearn
For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,
Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back
In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,
Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,
Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall!"

THE WHITE SOUL

IN 1680 Rome was merely a good sized town, then as now living chiefly on the glory of its past history. Since it was homogeneous in population, every one was interested in the affairs of his neighbors.

However there was as yet no particular reason for any one to be in any way excited over the affairs of Pietro and Violante Comparini, care-free citizens of the middle class who married young and were now in the early fifties. They stood in excellent repute with their neighbors as hospitable souls who were blessed with a goodly portion of this world's goods. Pietro owned a house on the popular Via Vittoria and a villa, "meant for jaunts and jollity", in the lonely Pauline district. Why shouldn't they be blessed with friends?

" No wine
Like Pietro's and he drinks it every day!
His wife's heart swelled her bodice, joyed its fill
When neighbors turned heads wistfully at church,
Sighed at the load of lace that came to pray."

They were just the sort to have lived their years with little thought of the future, but now Pietro, "good, fat, rosy, careless man", began to cultivate a sorrow. With many sighs he constantly complained to Violante, always undoubtedly much the better man of the two, that they had no heir, and lacking an heir in direct line their property, which he held in usufruct, would be seized by strangers. It gave him the cold chills to realize:

"Prosperity rolled river-like and stopped,
Making their mill go; but when wheel wore out,
The wave would find a space and sweep on free
And half-a-mile off, grind some neighbor's corn.

THE WHITE SOUL

"Adam-like Pietro sighed and said no more:
Eve saw the apple was fair and good to taste,
So plucked it, having asked the snake advice."

Translated into plain prose, if Pietro wanted an heir, an heir he must have. Why else did he have money except to satisfy his desires? Heaven knew he never stinted her, and here was a chance to reward his goodness to her by making his last years radiantly happy. Of course he mustn't be allowed to suspect, and wasn't that just the reason why the good God had given her the better brain of the two?

Violante scouted about until she discovered a woman washing clothes out in the open air at a cistern, a poor drab creature who was going to have a child. Following her home to a wretched hovel, she climbed after her to a miserable attic and found it easy to strike a bargain. She felt so jolly about her success that on the way home she stopped in at a church and sang the Magnificat so loudly that the priest turned around to see who was offering "the obstreperous praise."

With her conscience placidly at ease, she returned home and announced to her over-joyed husband that he might expect to be presented with an heir. Really she felt quite smug about the deception. Who could possibly be harmed? She would make good Pietro happy, and they would have a child they could both adore and provide for abundantly, thus saving the little one from growing up in an atmosphere of poverty and sin.

"This fragile egg, some careless wild bird dropped,
She had picked up from where it waited the footfall,
And put in her own breast till forth broke finch
Able to sing God praise on mornings now.
What so excessive harm was done? she asked."

In due time the child was brought to Violante from the dying mother, and Pietro, entirely deceived, was beside himself with joy. He and his wife "were meant to love a babe", and he believed this little black-eyed waif bore his

POMPILIA AND HER POET

own blood in her veins and so would inherit all the property he possessed. Violante confessed afterward that she did feel twinges of conscience which drove her to burn candles before altars in the church or pay for masses to be said for the forgiveness of her sins.

There was a proud procession to the Church of San Lorenzo in Lucina and before the great altar over which hung Guido Reni's Crucifixion the baby was christened Francesca Camilla Vittoria Angela Pompilia. Then the two elderly people settled down to their proud task of rearing a child,—

"Each like a semicircle with stretched arms
Joining the other round her preciousness."

Everything that was unhappy, everything that might sully her girlhood was kept from Pompilia. For themselves it did not matter:

" They scrambled through
The world's mud, careless if it splashed and spoiled,
Provided they might so hold high, keep clean
Their child's soul, one soul white enough for three."

The jolly Pietro—

"Crawled all-fours with his baby pick-a-back,
Sat at serene cat's cradle with the child,"

and—it seemed to them hardly time in which to realize their happiness in the little one—suddenly they found themselves confronted by a tall beauty of twelve years, with white skin, great black eyes, and a bounty of black hair.

When this seeming miracle really dawned on Violante as an accomplished fact, her active brain set to work on a problem. No girl could be more beautiful than their Pompilia, and didn't they know she was as lovely inside as she was outside, a perfect lily of a maiden? They had done very well for her so far, and now it behooved her to find

THE WHITE SOUL

the proper husband for her daughter. Pompilia was too precious to be wasted on some one of their own class; besides here was her own opportunity to atone for the sin she had committed in deceiving her husband and the law of her land. By giving the girl an assured social position she would make it certain that Pompilia's future could never be jeopardized.

While the mother milled these thoughts over in her mind, Pompilia would often ask her wonderingly what she was thinking about. Then Violante would laugh in confusion and tell her little girls shouldn't be so curious but should keep on playing with their dolls and let mother make plans. Eve again was asking the snake for advice, and the devil was on her side with chosen henchmen ready to consummate the sacrifice.

In Arezzo, the oldest of Tuscan towns, the Franceschini were a proud old family with a history almost as old as the town. Age however does not always make for honor, and certainly the three sons of Countess Beatrice were a scurvy lot. While their sisters had been able to marry without dowry on the strength of their rank, poverty had become stark for the mother and sons. Count Guido as a lad had wanted to go into the army, but was reminded that as heir to title and estates his duty was at home. Then, pining for fame and glory and remembering that some of Italy's great prelates, even including one Pope, had been Franceschini, he dallied with the thought of the Church. No, he was told, his brothers could venture in that fold but he must marry. A Cardinal who was a friend of the family decided to become his patron and advised the sixteen year old lad to come to Rome and see what pickings might fall in his way. Guido determined to take this advice.

In Rome he lived on the fringe of the church, taking some minor orders which would confer temporal benefits without binding him to any religious obligations. There he lived the life of a young blade of his time, riding, dancing, gambling, fencing, never seeming to get anywhere so far as preferment went, but all the time expecting something

POMPILIA AND HER POET

would turn up. He waited thirty years and then it dawned on him that many who had seemed mere varlets to his aristocratic vision had passed beyond him and won the prizes. It was time for serious thought.

Guido had become,—

"A beak-nosed, bushy-bearded, black-haired lord,
Lean, pallid, low of stature, yet robust."

Although he had started with good intellect and every advantage of birth and patronage, he had attained to no nobility of character but had slunk into a mean existence, sycophantic, "prostrate among the filthy feeders." His mind "dwelt on the vile of life," his instincts were low, his pretensions base. Having no nobility, naturally he did not realize that he had proved unworthy of promotion; however he did at the age of forty-six quite sharply recognize the fact that he was still a mere gentlemen-squire, and the Cardinal had given him no preferment. To make demands he shrewdly realized would only precipitate disaster, but he decided to test his patron's good will toward him by announcing tentatively:

". The mother must be getting old.
I am tired; Arezzo's air is good to breathe."

To Guido's horror and despair he saw only relief dawn on the Cardinal's face. The crack of doom had sounded to all hopes of preferment in Rome.

Naturally he sought the advice of his brother, Abate Paolo, the centerpiece of the sinister Franceschini brotherhood, who had been established in Rome for thirty years. More suave, more wily, more hypocritical than Guido, he had made friends in high places and owned houses and land. The youngest of the three had remained at home, but he also had taken orders and risen to be Canon Giriamo. Both were a disgrace to the Church:

"Two obscure goblin creatures, fox-faced this,
Cat-clawed the other."

THE WHITE SOUL

Guido was in a towering rage by the time he reached Paolo's home. He growled out:

"Where is the good I came to get at Rome?
Where the repayment of the servitude
To a purple popinjay, whose feet I kiss,
Knowing his father wiped the shoes of mine?"

Paolo, fat, paunchy, smug, having played his own cards so well, glanced at his brother's hand:

"Patience! You haven't had the proper luck. Let's see if I can't handle your cards better than you have done. Why, you have all the honors, title, head of the house,—how you have misdealt! In the first place these honors will win you a bride. Go to the barber, choose your freshest suit, and then we will go to a woman I know, a wig dealer at Place Colonna, and I'll say: 'Dear, give us counsel! Here's my brother, the Count. He wants a wife and when he gets one promised, he will slip twenty zecchines under the scalp of his wig when he sends it to you for repairs and I myself will add a trifle to that sum!'"

This plan was carried out and at once the woman said:

"I know the very girl! Pompilia Comparini. Her mother is as shrewd as you find them but the father is easy. The girl has hair as black as that patch and eyes as big as that pomander, and she'll slip as smooth into a fortune as the Pope's foot slips into his pantoufle."

"I'll go to her father!" cried Guido, all eagerness, but Paolo put up his fat hand in protest.

"Yes, and throw away your last court-card, no doubt! You have put yourself in my hands, so I shall dictate your lead. Why do you suppose priests play with women, whether they are maids, wives, or mothers? I'll tell you. Just because they know how to manage their men and so take them off our hands. Didn't I choose this sleek young barberess? Now let me wait on Madam Violante!"

At the hour when Pietro took his afternoon nap and Pompilia was busy somewhere in the house over her embroidery frame, Paolo had his interview with Violante.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

The fat, gross priest sat, polishing his great flap-hat with his hand or smoothing out the creases of his silk stockings as he talked, but never once did his cold, calculating grey eyes lose their hold on hers. He described their old Tuscan palace in very rosy terms, then went on to speak of the Franceschini:

"We are a very old family, yes, very, very old. Not so rich, but yet not so very poor, and we have expectations that some day we shall be warmed by the scarlet of the Cardinalate. However my brother the Count is getting restless. He wants certainty, not promises, and he is yearning for Arezzo, quite homesick, in fact. Honors here in Rome mean nothing to him any more. My eardrums fairly ache with his cries for the Tuscan palace and the villa, day and night. Naught will serve him except lighting our mother's visage and heart with a proxy second youth, hope and gaiety once more. In short he has decided that he must take home a young bride. Since we can't make him great here in Rome, I have decided to make him happy in Arezzo. I feel I can't trust him in the open market for a wife; with his title some scheming mother would be sure to insinuate a sparrow-hawk into the nest, or an unfledged cuckoo! We are not out after name or fame—having our own full measure of those. Nor do we seek worldly aggrandizement. What we want is some wonder of a woman's heart, untainted by this grimy earth, tender and true, a good girl with whatever dowry came to hand; why this would be the very bride my brother seeks. Now, Signora Comparini, is it true that you have in this very house a lily of a maiden, a wife worthy of Guido's house and hand and heart? I could do no less than come and ask. I have spoken. The matter is off my mind."

With the great air Paolo rose, kissed Violante's hand, and went forth grandly as if the Pope walked just behind! Violante rubbed her eyes in bewilderment, wondering if the whole interview had been a dream. Then she hurried upstairs, awakened Pietro, and eagerly poured into his ears her marvellous news that some one, somewhere, had

THE WHITE SOUL

seen their golden apple and wanted to serve it up at the feast of the gods.

It was Pietro's turn to rub his eyes, try to look wise and woeful at the same time, and, after putting on his periwig and taking his cane in hand, sally out to ask some of his cronies at the Boat-fountain about this Hercules who had stooped to ask his daughter's hand in marriage. They roared heartily and told him his Hercules was heir to a bit of stubble and a brick-heap; a parasite and picker-up of crumbs which fell from the Cardinal's table. Now he was shaken off and had no place to go except home, and he wanted Pietro's money so he wouldn't have to shift for himself.

Shaking his puzzled head, Pietro returned to tell Violante, adding that it was lucky that the hope was extinguished before it became a misery. Paolo called for his answer and Pietro declined the honor, Violante apparently acquiescing in his decision. However she kept in touch with Paolo, and one day told Pompilia that she was going to bring a cavalier to see her next morning. A "cavalier" meant a fairy prince to the girl and the shock was great when she saw a small, bush-bearded, lantern-jawed, hook-nosed, yellow old man. But it meant no more to the child than a visit from an ugly doctor her mother had once called in, so she let him kiss her hand and went back to her dolls.

That evening Violante shrouded herself and the child in thick veils and went out into the heavy storm of a black December night. Pompilia, bewildered, knowing as little what was happening as does the lamb in the market place, was led into the dark gloom of the Church of San Lorenzo. Violante whispered:

"Here we get you a fine husband, my lamb."

Pompilia had little idea what a husband was. She had thought they must be entering the church to view a corpse as they had done before. Her mother pulled her on up to the altar, where the girl first caught sight of the "mischief-making mouth and eye" of Paolo, and heard the locking of the door behind them. Two candles on the altar gave

POMPILIA AND HER POET

all the light there was in the great, black, empty spaces, and she shivered and drew closer to her mother, the only real thing about this strange performance.

"Quick! Lose no time!" called Paolo into the gloom, and from behind the altar came "hawk-nose and yellowness and bush and all."

Guido took the girl's hand, and Paolo opened a book and began to mumble words. Then he told Pompilia she was a wife and must obey her husband as if he were Christ. Violante was weeping as she led the child back to the door, but she dried her eyes before they reached home. Outside the door she whispered:

"Not one syllable to your father. It isn't nice or modest for girl brides to talk. You mustn't tell a soul."

Pietro greeted them heartily and asked what priests meant, dragging women out in such heavy rain when Christmas was coming so soon and they would be washed clean in the confessional. Pompilia was "saved from immodest speech" by a squeeze from her mother's hand. She "kissed him and was quiet, being a bride."

Three serene weeks passed in mild wonder at the thing that had happened. Violante made no further reference to the matter. Finally Pompilia decided that it was exactly like the visit of the ugly doctor who had given her medicine and never returned.

"It is a blessing that one need not see husbands. That scarecrow too will not return!"

THE SHORN LAMB

POMPILIA's relief was short lived. One morning she sat at her embroidery frame in her room, singing childish songs, when she became conscious of loud voices downstairs. Her mother was crying, her father scolding; yes, there were two strangers there. She opened her door. They were flinging the words "Guido", "Paolo", "Pompilia", at each other like stones. She ran down into the room. There stood that ugly yellow "husband"; the sly-faced priest; her father, red, angry, stuttering out his words, and her mother sobbing and shrinking away under his reproaches:

"You have murdered us, me and yourself and this our child!"

An ugly grin distorted the husband's face.

"Murdered or not, your child is now my wife! I have come to claim her and take her to my home where she belongs."

Paolo interrupted suavely, addressing Pietro:

"Kinsman, why not use your sagacity to give us counsel? These two are married, whether you like it or loathe it, bless them or cast them off. Spilt milk cannot be put back into the bowl. Therefore let us turn disaster to account so the bridegroom will grace the bride with favor from the first, not begin marriage an embittered man!" He smiled; the game was wholly to his liking.

At his words Violante sobbed harder than ever.

"Yes, all of us are murdered past averting now! O my sin! O my secret!"

Pompilia stood there trying to understand. Was she the chattel that had caused the crime? Pietro alone realized her trouble.

"Withdraw, my child! We must not have the victim

POMPILIA AND HER POET

here while we discuss the value of her blood. For her sake I will consent to hear you talk. Go, child, and God help the innocent!"

Pompilia went obediently and began to tell her beads. After a time her mother joined her, her eyes still swollen and red, but trying to convince herself that matters were right again.

"You are too young, my dear, and cannot understand. Your father didn't understand either at first that I am trying to benefit us all. But you have prayed him back to his senses or we have talked him around to agree with us. Paolo was a great help. Guido not much. A priest is more like a woman than a man. Cheer up, dear! We have got you a noble husband, a palace, and a great name. We do not lose you but gain a son, for we are all going to live together in Arezzo in a great palace where you will be a queen, and know the Archbishop and the Governor. We shall see homage done to you before we die. So be good, and pardon me!"

" Pardon what?
You know things, I am very ignorant:
All is right if you only will not cry!"

Meanwhile in the room below under the wily guidance of Abate Paolo, Pietro was signing all his property, houses and fields, goods, chattels and effects, to Guido. For what was usufruct he must wait for Pietro's death, but until then he would have the use and interest. What did the old people need since they would have a home in Guido's palace? Wasn't Pompilia all they really wanted in their old age? In satisfying this bushy-bearded son-in-law, were they not making their daughter's happiness assured? In the end the two scoundrels bore the old man away to the Cardinal's palace so that dignitary might supervise the marriage articles. How could old Pietro, confronted by all that magnificence, have any further misgivings?

After they had sent the old man home, Guido and Paolo laughed and embraced each other. Said Paolo once more:

THE SHORN LAMB

"Didn't I tell you? Mothers, wives, maids,—these are the tools by which priests manage men."

Pietro and Violante,—

"With just the dusk o'the day of life to spend,
Eager to use the twilight, taste a treat,
Enjoy for once with neither stay nor stint
The luxury of lord-and-lady-ship,"—

eagerly departed with Pompilia for Arezzo and the palace of the Franceschini. There followed awakening and blank dismay. Instead of the expected pomp and pageantry with great folk dropping into the sumptuous castle for a friendly gossip, they found themselves immured in a dreary old black stone-heap on the grimy street of a dull town. Inside, the place was huge and bare as an old stone barn. Countess Beatrice, a grey old woman "with a monkey miene", incessantly sat at a wheel, spinning flax and shivering as she blew on the embers in an earth basket at her side. Guido was gruff and lowering; Girolamo impudent and derisive. The whole atmosphere was of craft and greed, penury and cruelty, "dose by dose of ruffianism dealt out at bed and board."

The two old people were appalled. They had—

"..... foregone housekeeping good and gay,
The neighborliness, the companionship,
The treat and feast when holidays came round,
The daily feast that seemed no feast at all,
Even the sun that used to shine at Rome."

Worse than that, they had signed away as easy dupes all property, and, they began to think seriously, made it of advantage for Guido to shorten their lives, either by suffering or in some more dire fashion. Could they do more for Pompilia here or back in Rome where they were known and where they could invoke the law? For four months they discussed the matter seriously, then managed to escape, not daring to take their child with them because, after all, she was Guido's wife.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Pompilia, still living as a little girl with her dolls and other simple treasures of her childhood in the room she had shared with her parents, bore their loss as she had borne everything,—bewildered, unable to grasp the reason for the upheaval in her life. Now she had no one to love her. She was afraid of the stern old woman; Guido treated her with disgust and brutal indifference; Canon Girolamo, the youngest of the brothers, leered at her, derided her, and tried to whisper vile things in her ear, Guido meanwhile laughing heartily at her confusion. Much of her time was passed at embroidery and prayers, and the long days somehow were lived through with a vague, ominous dread in her heart.

Back in Rome Pietro and Violante were reduced to dire poverty, living in a bit of an attic offered them by an old friend. Violante's scheming brain set to work on the problem. Hadn't all this terrible trouble come because of her sin? Wasn't it the punishment of God? But fortunately this was the year of the Pope's Jubilee, that good old Antonio Pignatelli, the enemy of evil, he who caused Louis XIV. to back down on what was the beginning of a schism in the Church. This was her chance to renounce evil, clear her conscience, and not have to pay a penny for it, since confession was free for all by decree of Pope Innocent Twelfth in celebration of his attaining his eightieth year.

It was a picturesque crowd she mixed with, lined up in Saint Peter's Square. Thieves, poisoners, assassins, and those who sought pardon for the lightest offenses, all filed into the great door and knelt before the Penitentiary. Violante had muffled herself past recognition, and when her turn came knelt and whispered the story of the fraud practised on her husband, which had had such evil consequences in their lives. The Penitentiary told her there could be no pardon from God until she had confessed to all whom she had wronged, her husband, his lawful heirs, and her son-in-law.

Back home she went, trembling with foreboding, and told Pietro the truth, whereupon for once his brain leaped

THE SHORN LAMB

ahead of hers. Six months before such news would have been a cold steel blade driven by inches through his heart. Now he sprang from his chair in joy and gave his wife a bear-hug in delirious excitement as he shouted:

"What? All that used to be may be again?
My money mine again, my house, my land,
My chairs and tables, all mine evermore?
What, the girl's dowry never was the girl's,
And, unpaid yet, is never now to pay?
Will she come back with nothing changed at all? . . .
Ay, let him taste the teeth o'the trap, this fox,
Give us our lamb back, golden fleece and all,
Let her creep in and warm our breasts again!
Why care for the past?—we three are our old selves,
And know now what the outside world is worth."

Eagerly Pietro carried the case before the courts. Violante, "blushing to the bone", publicly declared her fraud by renouncing her motherhood. Fortunately six witnesses were found who remembered what had happened thirteen years before and bore out her story. Then the old people begged that the law would interpose and redress the injury they had suffered since the property was Pietro's who had committed no fault, not having been privy to the fraud.

Abate Paolo pleaded Guido's case, claiming that he was the innocent victim and should not be made to suffer, and it would be unfair for those who had committed the fraud to win the prize. The court was rather amusingly conciliatory in the verdict. Pompilia was a changeling undoubtedly, but her dowry, though not hers under the circumstances, should be given to Guido as part payment for the injustice he had suffered. Pietro's contract to resign his estates should be held invalid and they should be returned to him.

Of course neither side was satisfied. Pietro protested that there was no reason why he should pay the dowry of a child that was not his; Paolo that if his brother had a right to the dowry, then he certainly had a right to the estates.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Therefore the case was thrown back for reinvestigation, and in the meantime Pietro was given back his villa so he and his wife might no longer depend on the charity of their friends.

This action worked quick disaster to Pompilia. Guido, previously surly and indifferent, now became an active tormentor, also giving Girolamo free rein in the hope that, if Pompilia were sufficiently goaded, she might break out in revolt and put herself in the wrong by fleeing to her parents in Rome. Thus he would have a charge against her, a fresh grievance, and would regain freedom for new machinations.

His first step was to take a pencil and, having a real trick with penmanship, write in a disguised hand a letter to Abate Paolo which purported to be an affectionate, sisterly missive from Pompilia. In it she told the household news, rejoiced that her vile parents had had the grace to remove themselves, and said they had instigated her to poison every one in the castle, set fire to it, flee with a lover and follow them to Rome.

Pompilia, never having learned to read or write, was obedient when Guido guided her hand while she retraced the pencil characters in ink. She had learned obedience made her difficult days less difficult and,—

"She had as readily retraced the words
Of her own death-warrant,—in some sort 'twas so."

In Rome Paolo showed the letter wherever he thought it might be remembered later and arouse public sentiment against the Comparini in case his brother should carry out the plot simmering in his evil brain.

BROKEN ON THE WHEEL

GUIDO now began:

"To worry up and down, across, around,
The woman hemmed in by her household bars,—
Chase her about the coop of daily life,
Having first stopped each outlet thence save one."

Pompilia, beginning to think for herself, could not understand or even imagine what he was aiming at by his tortuous conduct. When he charged her with being a coquette, posing at the window to allure the gaze of some passer-by, she knew he was lying but could not conceive of a reason. Therefore she stayed away from the window and remained more quietly than ever in the house. When his simpler cruelties seemed to sheer off from her patient endurance, he worked one which was more brutal.

One afternoon she sat in the bare hall, bent over her embroidery and wincing at the sneers of the two brothers. Finally she arose quietly and attempted to steal away to her own chamber. Suddenly Guido thundered:

"How long is this comedy of marriage to last? From this time on you share my room."

For a moment Pompilia clasped her hands to her fluttering heart, her terrified eyes passing from one leering face to the other. Then she turned, seized her veil from where it hung on a peg on the wall, and ran out into the street, never stopping until she reached the palace of the Archbishop. He stood for God, and who but God could help her now?

She rushed in, fell upon her knees and clasped the Archbishop's feet, beseeching him to place her in a convent, let her give her life to God. He asked her why and she sobbed out her story, praying:

POMPILIA AND HER POET

"Let me henceforth lead the virgin life you praise in the Mother of God!"

"What folly of ignorance!" he declared impatiently "You have taken the vows of a married woman."

"Oh, I did not know! I was a child, barely twelve years old. He never wanted me. He wanted only the money I brought to him. He doesn't love me. He hates me and is harsh with me always. He only wants to punish me—to pollute me. Let me go to a convent!"

The Archbishop spoke severely to her.

"No wonder your husband is what you call harsh to you. The poor Count has to manage a mere child whose parents have left her ignorant of all the things she should know."

"But I am no longer ignorant," Pompilia cried, "and I know he seeks me for hate and not for love. My husband's brother, Canon Girolamo, has told me against my will much that is evil, and my husband sees it, knows it, lets him do this wrong."

"More scandal and against a priest this time!" The Archbishop shook his head impatiently. "Oh, rise up child, for you are so much a child that the rod would be too old a punishment! Go home and embrace your husband and obey him in all things! Do your duty and no more complaints!"

Pompilia, wild eyed and despairing, trying to choke back her terrified sobs, slowly made her way through the dreary streets. At the door she paused long, a hunted wild thing lifting her face to the skies. At last she shook her head.

"Man will not help me. Where is God?"

No answer came. Shivering with uncontrollable terror she entered the house.

For three long years the girl dragged out a hopeless existence. Neither Guido's tortures nor Girolamo's effrontery waned. Twice more she rushed, maddened by misery, to the Archbishop who listened and sent her back home. Three times she appealed to the Governor who bade her

BROKEN ON THE WHEEL

"hold her tongue and unloose her hands from handling his gout!" She ought to know that her husband was master in his own house and had the privilege of correcting his wife's faults at will. Then she begged Guido's cousin, Canon Conti, a fat, waggish, good-natured soul who was sorry for her, to help her escape. He told her frankly that he did not dare arouse Guido's wrath. As a last resort she went to a simple friar, made her confession admitting that she was tempted to end her misery by the sin of self-slaughter, and besought him to write her parents, urging them to come to her rescue from wretchedness she could no longer endure. The good friar wrote the letter at her dictation, but after she had gone decided that he ought not to mix in matters so serious, sighed "at matrimony as the profound mistake", and burned what he had written.

Guido, weary with the court's delay, now determined to get rid of Pompilia in such a way that he could divorce her. Accordingly at Carnival time he decided to show her in the market place in the hope of entangling her with another man. She wondered when he brought her a striking costume and ordered her to put it on and accompany him to a public play. He had taken a box and placed her conspicuously in front while he crouched, wary and sinister, behind in the shadow where none could see him. Pompilia faced the stranger-throng, conscious that their eyes were one stare, their voices one buzz. Embarrassed, she fixed her attention on the stage. Two lovers sang:

"True life is only love, love only bliss;
I love thee,—thee I love!"

Down below in a stall was Cousin Conti accompanied by a fellow canon, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, a tall athletic young priest with a spiritually handsome face. He looked up and saw a beautiful young woman, strange and sad, and thought it was like seeing a Raphael suddenly unveiled behind the high altar. Conti discovered his rapt gaze, traced it to Pompilia, and laughed:

"Wait, I'll make her look at you!"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Whereupon he threw a twist of bon-bons into her lap, then waggishly dodged down out of sight behind his companion. Pompilia had been thinking of her parents, wondering why they did not come to rescue her. Startled, she looked to see who had thrown the bon-bons—and saw Caponsacchi. Instantly she knew he had never thrown them. Conti rose from behind the other, laughed and waved his hand as much as to say:

"Just the privilege of a cousin to have a little jest with you."

No, that stranger, silent, grave, almost solemn, would never have transgressed in that fashion. His face was like the faces of her childhood saints. She felt calmed, ennobled, gazing in his eyes for that moment.

Down below Conti whispered to Caponsacchi:

"Isn't she a beauty? It's my new cousin. That fellow lurking in the back of the box is Guido, the old scape-grace! How he sulks and waits for the time her parents will be dead and he can get a pocket full of gold! See the chap, black and mean and small! He's looking at us. You'd better look away at Light-skirts over there. I was a fool to throw those bon-bons. I'll try to make my peace, think up some fib to tell him. Prudence, for God's love!"

He made his way to the box.

"Cousin, I flung them to see if I could make you look as austere as Caponsacchi looks, my tall friend down there. Ah, Guido, you here? Beg your wife to forgive! I flung them so they must have hit her like a cannon-ball. Forgive me! I must hurry. Good-bye!"

Scowling Guido had his evil purpose focused. This handsome priest would be a far better bait than he could have expected to find. Unwittingly Conti had done him a fine turn. Now he would make Pompilia pay him for the costume he had bought her.

As she walked home she was almost unconscious of the thunder cloud at her side. She had seen a vision. The earth was not all bad, God had not forgotten. No,—

BROKEN ON THE WHEEL

"God has yet a servant, man a friend,
The weak a savior, and the vile a foe.
How good were help like his for me!"

That night at supper Guido's voice broke rudely in on her dreams, sneering and snarling with crafty pretense of rage.

"What about that buffoonery? Do you think I am your dupe? What man would dare throw comfits in a strange lady's lap? He knew you or he wouldn't dare be so insolent and Conti was well trained to be his stalking-horse. He is always hanging around this corner, that priest, publishing my shame and your impudence. O Christ, why don't I kill her quick?"

With a great show of anger he drew his sword and threatened her. Pompilia, long used to this sort of treatment and trained to endure, said quietly:

"I have never seen him before nor has he seen me."

"Phaugh! Since you play the innocent I will inform you that this amour is the town talk, and so shall my revenge be! Does he presume on being a priest? I warn him that this sword shall pink his lily-scented cassock through next time I catch him under your window."

Pompilia, still exalted by the memory of Caponsacchi's face, answered:

"Let God save the innocent! But death is far from a bad fate."

Meanwhile Caponsacchi had gone home thrilled by the vision of that face!

"That night and next day did the gaze endure,
Burnt to my brain, as sunbeam through shut eyes,
And not once changed the beautiful, sad, strange smile."

He, sonneteer, lutist, "the Church's own yet verily the world's; more man as yet than priest"; encouraged to lead the gay life because of his influence there,—now found life strangely different; found that sad smile ever glowing at him from his book of prayers; found himself in revolt against his former life as "fribble and coxcomb", and

POMPILIA AND HER POET

yearning to do great deeds for some vague reason which he had not yet traced to its source.

In this strange restlessness he dropped the social life and spent much time in the Church and in solitude. The Bishop who was his patron learned that the young priest had kept away from some noblewomen he had been set to bait, and challenged him abruptly.

"Why do you play truant in the Church all day long? Are you turning Molinist?"

Caponsacchi smiled and answered:

"Sir, what if I turned Christian? That might be. The truth is I am troubled in my mind. They say the new Pope is a priest who thinks. Arezzo is a limited world. I'd like to go to Rome. I will live alone there as one can do in a crowd, and look into my heart a little."

A week had passed since he had seen Pompilia. He announced to his friends:

"As soon as Lent is over I shall go to Rome.

News of this decision came to Guido and fell in well with his schemes. Margherita, his wife's maid, was his willing tool. Incessantly she prattled to Pompilia of the handsome priest and of Count Guido's jealousy. Guido would be sure to kill him unless Pompilia sent a glove or ring as a token of warning. Surely she did not want the "handsomest, frankest, and liberalest gentlemen" in the city to die for her "to appease a scurvy dog hanging's too good for." She would take the priest a message and never a soul should know.

Pompilia rebuked her sharply but the next night by direction of Guido Margherita actually did visit Caponsacchi. He sat by his window, his breviary open, meditating on the fact that his life seemed shaken under him, showing him the abyss into which he, a priest, had been slipping unawares. He thought how utterly disassociated he was, as one who had taken the vows of the priesthood, from the sad, strange wife of Guido:

" How I had a store of strengths
Eating into my heart which craved employ,

BROKEN ON THE WHEEL

And she, perhaps, need of a finger's help,
And yet there was no way in the wide world
To stretch out mine."

A tap came at his door and he called out, "Come in!" There entered "a masked muffled mystery" who laid a letter on his prayer book, then stood demurely waiting with folded arms. He opened it and read:

"Sir: I to whom you lately threw the comfits have a warm heart to give you in exchange. Come this night at the vesper hour to the side of the Palace Franceschini where the small terrace overhangs the street. My surly husband is away at his villa of Vittiano."

Just as Pompilia's face came between him and the page of prayers, so he saw it now as he read. That letter from that face? Never! Guido's mean soul grinned and leered behind this transparent trick.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Count Guido's maid. We all hate him. The lady suffers much. We show compassion, furnish help—especially when she fixes her choice as well as she has done this time. What answer will you give me to bear to the sweet Pompilia?"

Caponsacchi took his pen and wrote:

"Madam: No more of this! You are fair but I am occupied with other thoughts. What made you marry your hideous husband? 'Twas a fault for which you must taste the fruit. Farewell."

Caponsacchi smiled and said to himself as the woman glided out:

"He'll turn and twist and snuff at that till his brain grows drunk. Last month I might have played hte dupe and kept the sham appointment with my cudgel under my cloak. Now I am not in the mood."

Guido did scowl furiously when he got this answer but gave Margherita swift directions and a letter he had ready. She went to Pompilia, confessed that she had gone to see

POMPILIA AND HER POET

the priest in his own home.

"I asked him why he wanted to harm a sweet lady by prowling around our house when the Count was jealous and watching for him. I told him there were plenty of beauties who would die for a word and he ought to go and make them grateful, not try to warm your heart of stone. He turned first white and then red. He said he loved you and sat down and wrote this letter. Since you can't read, I'll read it to you. It begins, 'My Idol!'. . . ."

Pompilia snatched it from her hand and tore it to shreds.

"Why do you want to join the rest who harm me? Have I ever done you any wrong? Yet you turn into a foe and throw a noose to entangle me. Why?"

Margherita muttered and slunk out of the room, but next morning carried a second letter to Caponsacchi:

"You are cruel! Why is it you dare not come? Is it because you love some one else? I will take the crumbs that fall from your table gratefully. I blush, but if I break through all bounds, I have a good reason. I am wretched here—a monster tortures me. I hear you are going to Rome. Take me with you! Come and tell me you will this very evening. I am ever at my window at the *Ave*. Come!"

Caponsacchi lifted the woman's mask.

"So you did give my letter to the merry lady?"

"She kissed the seal and put it in her bosom. Then she wept all night because you did not come."

"What risk do we run from the husband?"

"No risk at all. The man's away. Besides it is that friend of yours he suspects, fat little Canon Conti. Guido always spends nights at the villa when springtime comes round. His wife he thinks is a child, and can a child outwit him?"

Her hard face leered in triumphed as Caponsacchi seated himself at a table and wrote:

"In vain do you urge me. I am a priest and you a wedded wife. Whatever kind of brute your husband prove, I have scruples."

BROKEN ON THE WHEEL

Everywhere for the next month Margherita waylaid him with letters following each other thick and fast—in the street, slipped under his door, in the church, between the leaves of his prayer book, pushed through his window, slipped under his plate. Everywhere he encountered the leer of "the sly adder":

"Are you still adamant and not flesh? Nothing to cure the wound and assuage the sorrow of the sweetest lamb that ever loved a bear?"

Meanwhile Guido's cruelty increased until one day, having borne all she could endure including blows which struck her to the floor, Pompilia fainted. When she came back to consciousness, Margherita leaned over and whispered, "Caponsacchi!" in her ear. Too weak to resist, Pompilia lay and listened.

"Why are you so hard to this kind priest? He asks you to grant him an interview so he may help you to escape from hell. Your husband dashes you against the stones; this man would place you in a shrine." Craftily she watched her mistress's face, then added: "It must be that you hate him and love your husband."

Wearily Pompilia answered:

"It is not true that I love my husband or hate the priest. I simply know that all you say is false, just as once when a child I knew a mad man was lying when he gibbered at me in the street and said he was the Pope. I saw Caponsacchi at the play. The face I saw that one only time would be belied by the words you speak. So when you profess to show him to me, I always see that face. Go, leave me alone!"

Throwing up her hands in a gesture of despairing frustration, Margherita again slunk back to Guido for further orders.

THE GREAT HAZARD

APRIL was half gone. One night Pompilia prepared for bed in the despairing fashion that had been her habit for three years. One bit of Margherita's prattle lingered in her memory as she lay down:

"Every one will soon be leaving for Rome now Easter's past, even Caponsacchi, drained of heart and hope."

What matter, any more than the heavily falling rain outside? All that mattered was that another day of suffering was finished. How good it was to sleep and so get nearer death!

What was the summons which woke her suddenly in the early spring dawn, thrilling with life in her, life about her, change everywhere? She sprang from her bed and ran to the window. Sunbeams lay like a drawbridge from earth to the skies; birds sang merrily and built their nests. Springtime and hope! She must cast off death and woo life—life that must be made sweet and not bitter for the sake of the child she was to bear—in safety, please God, not behind these prison bars! Somehow for that child's sake she must reach her parents and Rome!

Just recently she had appealed to Conti once more to help her escape. Again he told her that he did not dare risk Guido's vengeance and had added:

"Why don't you try Caponsacchi? He's your true Saint George! He'll slay the monster and set the princess free. Try him!"

Again that name, and Conti had no idea that it had been made ominous in her ears! Now on this morning as she stood letting the sun bathe her in its glory, Margherita entered and began her usual wheedling lies.

"Up and at the window already? Of course you have no thought of Caponsacchi who stood there all night in

THE GREAT HAZARD

the rain looking his last at your lattice before he goes to bury his dead hope in Rome."

It seemed to Pompilia that some power inside herself forced her to turn, to speak.

"Tell Caponsacchi he may come!"

Margherita was a comic sight as she stood, mouth open, eyes popping out of her head. She recovered herself enough to say:

"Yes, come and take a flower-pot on his head flung from your terrace. That's what you mean. No? No joking? Sincere truth? But suppose he refuses to believe after all your hardness? What message can you send him to make him believe?"

"Tell him I will be standing on the terrace after the *Ave Maria*, at first dark."

"I wish I could have a long lock of your hair—oh, never mind!"

She fairly danced out of the room to find Guido who in smirking delight concocted a letter he felt sure would turn the trick.

It did. Caponsacchi read it with amusement and disgust.

"Fly from here! You have gained nothing by your timidity. My husband has found out that it is you and not Conti I love and he will stick at nothing to destroy you. Run until you reach Rome. Stay away from my window. He might be posted where he will kill you. Fly!"

Caponsacchi reached for his pen and wrote in answer:

"You raise my curiosity since I am but man. Tell your husband he owns the palace, not the street under your window. If it should please me to walk that way this evening, Guido may have two troubles, first to get into a rage, and then to get out again. At the *Ave*!"

After Margherita had gone, he sat whimsically smiling. Guido had bored him long enough with his teasing and lies. Let him and all his brood lie in wait to bite his heel—

POMPILIA AND HER POET

the more the better. He would tell Guido what a man thought of a thing like him, then smite his foulness in the face.

All day Pompilia prayed to God the Strong, God the Beneficent. Finally as the light began to wane, it seemed to her that a hand pushed her out on the terrace, and there—oh, it seemed so natural, so right, so wholly God's answer to her prayer!—just below the terrace on the street her deliverer was waiting. His face was silent and solemn as it had been before and in her dreams.

To him expecting something so different, she seemed like Our Lady of all the Sorrows. He could only stand still as stone, all eyes, all ears, and listen to her gentle words:

"Foolish words have been brought from you to me, but I knew you could never have written them. I can neither read nor write myself, so the maid you gave them to partly explained their sense. She is but one of the people in whose power I am and I felt always your soul like the pure strong wind behind the words she falsely said you had written. It is to your strong soul I make my appeal. Good true love would help me now so much. I am being put to death here, and for myself it does not matter. But now it seems there is something I must save for God. You go to Rome. Take me to my parents there. Wait, let me tell you why!"

Caponsacchi, Pompilia, both had lost all sense of evil, all thought that Guido might be exultantly watching from behind a lattice. They were alone in the solemn isolation of spiritual communion. She told him what she had had to endure in the loss of her parents, the hatred of her husband, in the fact that Archbishop, Governor, no one would listen to her prayers for help:

"That it is only you in the wide world
Who, all unprompted save by your own heart,
Come proffering assistance now, were strange,
But that my whole life is so strange: as strange
It is my husband whom I have not wronged
Should hate and harm me.

THE GREAT HAZARD

" I shall break
No law that reigns in this fell house of hate.

"I take from your excess of love
Enough to save my life with, all I need.

"Take me as you would take a dog, I think,
Masterless left for strangers to maltreat.
How could I find my way there by myself?

"Now that you stand here and I see your face,
Though you have never uttered word yet,—well I know,—
Here too has been dream-work, delusion too,
And that at no time, you with the eyes here,
Ever intended to do wrong by me,
Nor wrote such letters therefore. It is false,
And you are true, have been true, will be true.
To Rome then, when is it you will take me there?
Each minute lost is mortal. When?—I ask."

It seemed to Pompilia that Caponsacchi spoke in three words—

" an eternity
Of speech, to match the immeasurable depth
Of the soul that then broke silence—"I am yours".

He promised that he would make all necessary arrangements and return next evening at the same time to give her directions, then turned toward home. Away from the spell cast over him by the sight of her distress and by the revelation of her crystalline soul, a hard struggle began. All that night he paced the city. At dawn he found himself in front of the Pieve, his own church, and it seemed to say to him:

"Am not I the Bride of your vows as a priest? What right have you to plan to rescue a woman of the flesh?"

Caponsacchi frankly realized the inconsistency of this scrupulous fear in his heart. As the pet of society he had had much to do with women at the very request of his Bishop; now that his heart had been swept clean by lifting his eyes to the level of Pompilia's exquisite purity and

POMPILIA AND HER POET

faith, his dead conscience had sprung to life to urge him to frustrate the nobility of which she stood in dire need!

He went home and sat stone-still all day long, incapable of action. Vespers rang, and still he could not move.

"I am a priest. I think God who created her must save her too—by some miracle, without my help. Perhaps prayer will aid."

Hastening to the Pieve he heard the Office; then returned home to sit in the dark and suffer for having failed her; to pray that she might know that it was not fear that held him back.

Next day he tried to work, tried to think her name had been saved from scandal, that he had been wise. But as time wore on he said to himself that perhaps he had failed the priestly office in not giving her advice. He would go and bid her not to despair. Surely that would be right, not wrong.

There she stood on the terrace, Our Lady of the Sorrows!

"Why have you suffered me to stay
Breaking my heart two days more than was need?
Why delay help your own heart yearns to give?"

All else was swept away. Nothing mattered except that he dare to be good and true himself."

"Waste no word, no thought even to forgive me! Tomorrow night leave the house before daybreak in the solid dark after the moon has set. Go to the Torrione and out at the Gate of San Clemente, the only one that will be unguarded at that hour. Cross the street to the inn. I shall be waiting there."

"I shall find the way."

This time the power he felt in her presence lasted on. He went over the route himself to be sure it was practicable, and made arrangements for horses and a driver the next morning but one. Again he did not sleep, but now he felt that the old barriers of right and wrong had changed for this especial mission. The day brought no different counsel. It was the eve of Saint George's Day—

THE GREAT HAZARD

and he must play his part on the morrow in the spirit of that Saint!

In the black darkness he waited by the inn, "a tune in the ears, a light in the eyes." There came a whiteness—and he knew it was Pompilia's soul shining through the black of her raiment! Earth grew lighter as she slipped from the shadow and came to his side. Only the soft breath of her sigh broke the stillness as she glided into the carriage.

She had escaped at last! That night, secretly gloating, Guido had commanded:

"You whom I loathe, beware you break my sleep
This whole night. Couch by me like the corpse
I would you were!"

She had crept out so quietly, surely he had not known! Not a sound had she made as she crept ghostlike from great dark room to great dark room to reach the liberty of the open street. Now all was to forget except her thanks to God who had sent her this deliverance. Even that must wait—all seemed so unreal, so strange!

"To Rome and burn the ground!" cried Caponsacchi to the driver as he leaped in at her side. In silence they rode on through the night. As day began to dawn she turned her face toward his and he read the question in her eyes.

"You are safe so far," he said gravely. "We have passed Perugia and are near Assisi—this is holy ground."

At the first stop to change horses he brought her food.

"Won't it delay us if I eat?" she asked anxiously, and he told her no.

"I can't feel anything," she said. "Is that a bad sign—as pain sometimes leaves a sick body because the hope of cure is gone?"

"Think rather that health begins."

Later in the day she asked:

"Have you a mother?"

"She died when I was born."

"A sister then?"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

"No sister, either."

"Yet how kind you are to me!"

That evening when they heard the Angelus ring from a convent tower as they passed, she begged him to read the service—"Gabriel's song and the lesson and the little prayer to Raphael proper for us travellers."

It was dark when they reached Foligno and he begged her to go to sleep, if only for an hour:

" But her whole face changed,
The misery grew again about her mouth,
The eyes burned up from faintness, like the fawn's
Tired to death in the thicket, when she feels
The probing spear of the huntsman. "Oh, no stay!"
She cried in the fawn's cry, "On to Rome, on, on!
Unless 'tis you that fear—which cannot be!"

Next morning at an inn he succeeded in making her descend and the wife of the host, a jolly faced woman with a baby in her arms, took charge of her. Caponsacchi found Pompilia holding the baby when he sought her after the horses had been changed. She smiled up at him:

" How much good this has done!
This is a whole night's rest and how much more!
I can proceed now though I wish to stay."

During the day she talked with him, gently, frankly, telling him many of the things she had thought out in her loneliness, and how she prayed if harm should come, it might not light on him. But she grew more weary and, as evening drew on, wandered a little in her mind. He was alarmed and glad when they caught sight of the old tower and the white-walled clump of buildings which comprised Castelnovo. The sun was setting. Suddenly she woke from her stupor and screamed:

" No, I must not die!
Take me no farther, I should die! Stay here
I have more life to save than mine!"

THE GREAT HAZARD

She sank back on the seat in a dead faint, just conscious of his pitying face as he leaned over her in quick alarm. The kindly host and hostess and a pitying group gathered around the carriage as he lifted her out and bore her into the inn,—“the motionless and breathless pure and pale Pompilia.” The hostess guided him up the stairs and into a room where he laid her on a couch. The host urged him:

“Leave her to us; she will be all right by morning.”

What else could Caponsacchi do? It seemed safe and yet his heart was filled with foreboding. He paced the passage and kept watch all night long, more and more fearful, throbbing with fear from head to foot. At last he could endure the foreboding no longer. He stepped out into the courtyard and aroused the sleeping grooms, ordering them to get horses and carriage out in haste. Then he turned toward the door to enter and arouse Pompilia.

Facing him, black, scowling, malicious, stood Guido, reinforced by the Commissary and half a dozen of the Civil Force!

CATASTROPHE

STERN, alert, Caponsacchi faced him as he would a loathsome reptile.

Guido sneered:

"My salutations to your priestship! Come, the lady! Could you leave her side so soon? She hasn't drugged you as she drugged and poisoned me and my household. Come, seize him quick! Arrest and hold him! There, that's done. Now for her!"

Caponsacchi turned on the officers standing each side of him, ready to pinion his arms.

"I am a priest and privileged," he asserted quietly. He strode forward past Guido, then faced about and said:

"I will lead the way. I presume you men are expert, instructed how to find the truth and separate it from guilt. I ask you to see if you can find guilt on her face as it meets mine; I want you to judge between us and that mad dog howling there."

They crowded behind him up the stairway. The police opened the door:

" There she lay,
 Composed as when I laid her that last eve,
 On the couch, still breathless, motionless, sleep's self,
 Wax-white, seraphic, saturate with the sun
 Of the morning that now flooded from the front
 And filled the window with a light like blood.
 'Behold the poisoner, the adulteress,
 And feigning sleep, too! Seize! Bind!' Guido hissed."

Pompilia started up, threw off sleep, stood erect, face to face with her husband until he shrank back before the truth in her eyes. She saw her Saint George held by guards. Strength surged in her veins. With flashing eyes and outstretched arm she cried:

CATASTROPHE

" A worm must turn
If it would have its wrong observed by God!
I am God's, I love God, God—whose knees I clasp!
. And him
Also you outrage? Him, too, my sole friend,
Guardian and savior? That I balk you of,
Since—see how God can help at last and worst!"

She sprang fiercely at Guido, seized his sword and thrust at him:

"Die, devil, in God's name!"

But Guido lunged aside from the blade, and the police disarmed her, imprisoning her hands and holding Caponsacchi back. Guido hissed out through his teeth:

"Carry these criminals to the prison. I begin my search after the stolen property, gold, jewels, plate, money, and clothes they robbed me of before they fled. I have an idea I shall find some pretty love letters, too, somewhere concealed in this room." Not so difficult since he had brought them along!

Caponsacchi to his amazement saw that sympathy seemed to be with Guido, that all who were present were eager for a scandal. Therefore he demanded:

" What I say,
Slight at your peril! We are aliens here,
My adversary and I, called noble both;
I am the nobler, and a name men know.
. Being a priest,
Though in secular garb—for reasons good
I shall adduce in due time to my peers—
I demand that the Church I serve, decide
Between us, right the slandered lady there.
A Tuscan noble, I might claim the Duke;
A priest, I rather choose the Church,—bid Rome
Cover the wronged with her inviolate shield!"

This demand could not be refused. The police bore them off to separate cells in the local prison after they had

POMPILIA AND HER POET

looked sadly into each other's eyes for the last time on earth. Later they were taken separately to Rome. Saint George had saved his lady "for a splendid moment and no more," and the song of praise in their hearts was checked, which else would have "swelled to the full for God's will done on earth".

At that time trials were not public. Evidence was taken and pleas heard before Governor and Judges, "Tommati, Venturini and the rest," in an antechamber of the Hall of Justice,—

" . . . The same grim black-panelled chamber blinks
As though rubbed shiny with the sins of Rome."

Guido had gone home to Arezzo and Paolo was to plead for his brother, vouching for his black calumnies and offering the Court the forged letters.

Pompilia defended herself:

"Earth was made hell to me who did no harm:
I only could emerge one way from hell
By catching at the one hand held me, so
I caught at it and thereby stepped to heaven
That man you misinterpret and misprise—
The glory of his nature I had thought,
Shot itself out in white light, blazed the truth
Though every atom of his act with me
If God yet have a servant, man a friend,
The weak a savior, and the vile a foe,—
Let him be present, by the name invoked,
Giuseppe-Maria Caponsacchi!"

When Caponsacchi was brought before the judges he observed their spirit of levity, their desire to show their easy tolerance for the peccadillos of youth, especially of one noble in birth. What possible hope of erasing those smirks, of raising them to a plane where they could understand the spiritual beauty of his relationship with Pompilia? Coolly he parried their impudent questions with barbed repartee: "How could a young, innocent wife write such letters?"

CATASTROPHE

"She wrote them when the Pope wrote bestiality such as Pasquin attributes to him."

"How did the letters come to be found in the inn after your departure?"

"Because they were not there before I left."

"What of the clandestine visits paid the wife? It is alleged you climbed——"

"Flew on a broomstick to the man in the moon! Who says this?"

"The trusty servant Margherita."

"The one who brought letters from one who could not write and took back letters to one who could not read!"

"What about those kisses, frequent, frenetic in the coach?"

"Who charged this?"

"Borsi, who drove the night you fled away—after some weeks of sharp imprisonment, his obduracy melting, gave the witness."

"And so gained liberty, poor wretch!—

" Enough that first to last
I never touched her lips nor she my hand,
Nor either of us thought a thought, much less
Spoke a word which the Virgin might not hear. . . .
The spark of truth was struck from out our souls—
Made all of me, descried in the first glance,
Seem fair and honest and permissible love
Of the good and true—as the first glance told me
There was no duty patent in the world
Like daring try be good and true myself.
I stand here guiltless in thought, word and deed."

Cousin Conti came to Rome, boldly told the truth to the judges, and shortly afterward was found poisoned.

While the advocates were busy summing up the evidence, Abate Paolo, realizing that Guido had lost the case, pushed his way to the Pope, urging him to take the trial out of the secular court's incompetence. That wise, shrewd, lovable old man replied that one must still "render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's."

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Finally the Court gave the verdict as the Pope had prophesied — conventional punishment. Pompilia need not go back to her husband, but was consigned to the Convent of the Convertites in Via Lungara, while Caponsacchi was exiled from Rome to practice his priesthood in Civita, a town on the coast not far away.

Pompilia now knew what she had given up all hope of ever knowing again—peace and happiness, freedom from torture, and a chance to try to understand life. The songs and offices of the nuns; their quiet poise, companionship, and contentment; the balm of their love for her, and her hopes and prayers for the child she was to bear, all served to blot out the ugly past. Above all she found comfort in the glory of her Saint George to whom she owed this blessed freedom and peace,—

“This one heart gave me all the Spring!”

Old Pietro and Violante came to the convent often and were filled with wonder and something like adoration for this strange new daughter, purified through suffering and uplifted in faith and spiritual vision beyond her years. They told her that they had tried many times to communicate with her, but Guido had sent them word that each time they tried, Pompilia was made to suffer for their sins. They had followed up the suit for the restitution of dowry by a suit for divorce, so his villainy might never again gain any power over her.

Five months Pompilia rested quietly with the nuns:

“..... Weeks and months of quietude
I could lie in peace and learn so much—
Begin the task, I see how needful now,
Of understanding somewhat of my past,—
Know life a little, I should leave so soon.
Therefore because this man restored my soul,
All has been right; I have gained my gain, enjoyed
As well as suffered, nay, got foretaste too
Of better life beginning where this ends—
All through the breathing-while allowed me thus.”

CATASTROPHE

At the end of these five months, the sisters themselves petitioned that Pompilia might be allowed to leave the convent so as to combine the cure of her body with the cure of her soul; mend her thin arms and sunken eyes together with her mind in some spot where she might enjoy fresh air and less confinement. What place so fitting as the home of her parents, that lonely villa on the Pauline road? Abate Paolo, learning for the first time that Pompilia was to have a child, authorized this transfer, all the more willingly since it would mean that he need no longer pay the pittance necessary for her maintenance at the convent.

The old people surrounded the girl with every loving care and the peaceful, happy days lasted on. Pompilia was seventeen years and five months old when her son was born and lay in her arms for two days while her joy was at flood-tide. Then she sent him to be baptized in the little church near by:

"..... Something put it in my head
To call the boy 'Gaetano'—no old name
For sorrow's sake; I looked up to the sky
And took a new saint to begin anew.
One who has only been made saint—how long?
Twenty-five years: so carefuller, perhaps,
To guard a namesake than these old saints grow,
Tired out by this time—see my own five saints!"

Immediately after he was christened, the child was taken into the country because they feared Guido. Pompilia was broken hearted and the woman who was to nurse him tried to comfort her.

". . . . Why take on so? where is the great loss?
These next three weeks he will but sleep and feed,
Only begin to smile at the month's end;
He would not know you if you kept him here,
Sooner than that; so spend three merry weeks
Snug in the villa, getting stout and strong,
And then I bring him back to be your own,
And both of you may steal to—we know where!"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

As she had adjusted herself to everything else, so now Pompilia tried to find the joy hidden deep under the sorrow of the enforced separation:

"A whole long fortnight! In a life like mine
A fortnight filled with bliss is long and much.
All women are not mothers of a boy,
Though they live twice the length of my whole life,
And, as they fancy, happily all the same.
There I lay, then, all my great fortnight long,
As if it would continue, broaden out
Happily more and more, and lead to heaven.
Christmas before me—was not that a chance?
I never realized God's birth before—
How he grew likest God in being born.
This time I felt like Mary, had my babe
Lying a little on my breast like hers."

Only too true had been the premonition which bade the old parents hide the boy! Guido had snarled and brooded all these months over his fancied wrongs. Not one thing he had aimed at had come to pass as he had planned. His smouldering hate waxed hot and ready for the torch. This Paolo was only too ready to apply. He wrote from Rome:

"I congratulate you, my dear brother, on the fact that you have a son and our name goes on. The child was born to his unworthy mother in the lonely villa on the Via Paulina. It greatly behooves you to cherish him. I do not need to remind you that he will be the heir of that wretched Pietro, and *when the child inherits* you will come into your own again. He has been removed to the country where he is safe. I shall have quitted Rome so you are free to use my house when you arrive *to take the one step needful*."

Guido scratched his thick black thatch in bewilderment. Go to Rome? What did Paolo mean? Ah! The sulphur flame of the hidden thought lighted the blackness of his soul. To be sure! Why, of course. That was the way to get

CATASTROPHE

something out of the wreck. He drove at once in great haste out to his farm at Vittiano and brought back four ruffians who knew one thing only—that they must obey a Franceschini, whatever he commanded. With them he departed to Rome, and on Christmas Eve installed them in Paolo's empty house and set about perfecting his black designs.

It was the octave of Christmas, New Year's Day. Pietro and Violante had each given Pompilia an arm and helped her for the first time to a chair by the fireside. There they sat and talked happily. Said Violante:

"Some day it will be a great tall son gives you an arm from bed to board and back again."

Pietro began to plan.

"Our case will soon be decided. The law is stronger than that wicked man. Then we shall go outside the city to that new villa where we can hide in safety. We shall watch the baby grow strong in the good air. One or two of my old cronies will find their way out there, never fear! I'll find them a flask of the old sort, you may count on that!"

Pompilia smiled at the old man tenderly. Violante saw that she was unconsciously holding her arms as if her child were at her breast, and rocking slightly back and forth. She bent down and kissed her, laughingly reproving Pietro:

"You chatter like a crow! Pompilia gets tired of tattle and must go back to bed. Tomorrow she can do a little more."

Next day there was more of this simple, friendly happiness. Violante wrapped the old man up and sent him out to visit the churches. It was evening when he returned, powdered so thickly with snow that they laughed at him as he took off hat and cloak and rolled a great big log into the fireplace. Hardly had he joined his wife and Pompilia in big chairs where they could watch the flames and hear the story of his adventures during the day, when there came a knock at the door.

"Who is there?" called Violante as she walked across the room.

"Friends with a letter from Caponsacchi," came the answer.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Pompilia clasped her hands, her face eager and radiant. Nodding her head, the old woman opened the door, flinging it heart-wide to welcome news of him who had saved her child.

In burst the fury of hell,—hell's minions led by Guido. The black hatred on their faces, the flash of firelight on their daggers, screams, prayers, entreaties, lamps and furniture overturned, thrust after thrust of the daggers, Guido venomously lifting Pompilia by her hair to be sure she was quite dead—all these in the flash of an instant of time—then followed silence and blood-drunk flight from a blood-drenched home.

Neighbors had heard the screams and ran in, then screamed themselves with horror. Men rushed out to summon the Public Force. Women shrinkingly but tenderly bent over the bodies of their friends and neighbors. Over Pietro and Violante they shook their heads sadly. A woman excitedly ran to seize a little mirror from the wall and hold it above Pompilia's mouth. She examined it eagerly, then cried:

"God's mercy! The sweet lamb breathes!"

Outside in the blackness the Force followed the desperate, reeling flight of the assassins. They fled for twenty miles, then crawled into some bushes and sank into drunken slumber—lord and vassals in one dead heap, "each wrapped in bloody cloak, each grasping still his unwiped weapon." There the police found them at daybreak, red from head to heel, and brought them back to prison.

"How did you know I did the deed?" growled Guido as they locked him in a cell.

"Your wife bears witness."

Guido collapsed at the shock. He had made so sure she was dead! But Pompilia had prayed as never before that she might last long enough to tell God's truth—and it seemed that this single prayer of all the many she had prayed had been granted!

"NO WORK BEGUN SHALL EVER PAUSE FOR DEATH"

IN front of the altar in the Church of San Lorenzo where Pompilia had been baptized and so tragically married, lay the bodies of Pietro and Violante, candles all about them and huge tapers at their heads and feet. Rome had rarely known such a sensation. Everybody knew the old pair, if only because of their recent litigation and the previous fame of Pompilia's flight from the murderer. All day long a multitude flocked to the church and filled it to overflowing; women fainted, men fought for room. Sympathy was given or withheld, but all found zest in the scandal which seemed to many, "Hell broke loose on a butterfly!"

Pompilia miraculously had survived her twenty-two dagger wounds which had just escaped the heart. She who once had so longed for death, during the last months had developed so strong a will to live that now she commanded Death to delay until she had finished her work on earth. They had borne her to the long white lazar-house of Santa Anna where she lay "with patient brow and sad brave smile" on a low pallet bed, "a flower-like body, alive in the ruins."

There her last hours were blessed with love, reverence, almost adoration from all who were admitted to her presence. Brother Celestine, the Augustinian monk who heard her confession, always hovered near in order that he might not miss the blessing of her last words and smile. Never, he declared, had he confessed a dying person "so sweet and true and pure and beautiful." The lawyers who took her evidence left her bedside with sorrowful faces. Carlo Maratta, the great painter, bribed a porter, then slipped in and made a sketch of her face, declaring that no lovelier could be found in Rome. Monna Baldi, a palsied old woman, found her way to Pompilia's bedside and declared

POMPILIA AND HER POET

she was better just from touching the bedclothes; if she hadn't been driven out and had been allowed to touch Pompilia, she knew she would have been completely healed!

Meanwhile the law was taking its swift course. Evidence was heard in the same black chamber before the same judges who eight months before had been too paltering, too conciliatory. Two Advocates sat by: The Public Prosecutor, Johannes-Baptista Bottinus, and the Patron of the Poor, Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis, the latter set to defend Guido.

Guido proffered his own long, hypocritical defense. He made the most of having been tortured on the rack, and tried to elicit sympathy with his twitching brow and wincing lips, his wrenched shoulders and torn hands:

" In short, sirs, I thank you.
Four years I have so suffered in my soul,

This body torture marks agreeable change."

With the craft of a devil or a Machiavelli he placed his wrongs before the judges—incisive, shrewd, or assuming the guise of innocence and meekness. He reviewed in detail the story of his entire life; set forth the bitter disappointment he found in marriage. He was all white, Pompilia and her parents all black—a masterly presentation from a false viewpoint. His crime he based on his compelling desire to see and claim his child. At the door he had decided to give his wife one last test so as to see if she opened to the name of Caponsacchi. When he saw the door did open to reveal Violante, the author of all his woes, standing before him, he was driven suddenly insane and avenged the evil he had until that time endured:

" I did
God's bidding and man's duty, so breathe free.
. God shall not lose a life
May do him further service.
What have I been but innocent hitherto?
Give me—for last best gift—my son again!
Let me lift up his youth and innocence

"NO WORK BEGUN SHALL EVER PAUSE FOR DEATH"

To purify my palace, room by room.
Then may we—strong from that rekindled smile,—
Go forward, face new times, the better day.

Ending he promised that when his son should stoop to
kiss his hand and start at the sight of its mutilation, he
would tell the boy it was:

" just a trip
Of the torture irons in their search for truth,—
Hardly misfortune, and no fault at all."

Caponsacchi, summoned from Civita, strode in and
bowed to the Court, his young face aflame with horror and
indignation. Eight months before he had been a shocked,
reluctant witness; now he hurled his words at the Judges
as if he were very judge and they the accused. There was
no stifled tittering now. They were troubled, sober. Who
knew but this man had an invisible audience—just God!

The young priest began speaking as soon as he entered
the door, before he reached the stand. Rapidly his angry
words smote their ears, blow after blow:

"Men, for the last time, what do you want with me?
I left Pompilia to your watch and ward,
Pompilia is bleeding out her life belike,
Gasping away the latest breath of all
This minute while I talk
This Guido from whose throat you took my grasp,
Was this man to be favored, now, or feared,
Let do his will, or have his will restrained?
Pompilia! How does lenity to me
Remit one death-bed pang to her?

" If any of you
Dares think that I, in the face of death, her death
That's in my eyes and ears and brain and heart,
Lie—if he does, let him! I mean to say
So he stop there, stay thought from smirching her,
The snow-white soul that angels fear to take
Untenderly Sirs,
Only seventeen!"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Once more he reviews the entire story while this time they listen with grave faces, suffering him, believing him.

"I thought I had saved her. I appealed to Rome:
It seems I merely sent her to her death.
You tell me she is either dying now or dead
Oh, sirs, I cannot have the lady dead!
That erect form, flashing brow, fulgorant eye,
That voice immortal, oh, that voice of hers;
That vision in the blood-red daybreak—that
Leap to life of the pale electric sword
Angels go armed with—that was not the last
Of the lady!
Let me see for myself if it be so!
Though she were dying, a priest might be of use,
The more when he's a friend, too.
I never touched her with my finger-tip
Except to carry her to the couch that eve,
Against my heart, beneath my head bowed low,
As we priests carry the paten: that is why—
To get leave and go see her of your grace—
I have told you this whole story over again.

". For Pompilia—be advised,
Build churches, go pray! You will find me there,
I know, if you come—and you will come, I know.
Why, there's a Judge weeping! Did I not say
You were good and true at bottom? You see the truth—
I am glad I helped you. She helped me just so."

As for Guido, Caponsacchi prophesies that if he is allowed to live he will slip lower and lower in the scale of creation till at the very verge two men will be left alone in ghastly isolation—Judas Iscariot and Guido Franceschini. Made monstrous by solitude the two will claw and bite each other in hate:

"There let them grapple, denizens of the dark,
Foes or friends, but indissolubly bound,
On their one spot out of the ken of God
Or care of man, forever and evermore!

"NO WORK BEGUN SHALL EVER PAUSE FOR DEATH"

"Sirs, I am quiet again. You see we are
So very pitiable, she and I,
Who had conceivably been otherwise.
Pompilia will presently be with God;
I am, on earth, as good as out of it,
A relegated priest; when exile ends
I mean to do my duty and live long."

For the moment he allows himself to play with the
imagined life of a man who, unfettered by any vow, might
lead it at Pompilia's side, one with her in purpose and
will, having to do only with the true, the good, the eternal:

". and these, not alone
In the main current of the general life,
But small experiences of every day,
Concerns of the particular hearth and home:
To learn not only by a comet's rush
But a rose's birth,—not by the grandeur, God—
But the comfort, Christ. All this, how far away!
Mere delectation for a minute's dream!
Just as a drudging student trims his lamp,
Opens his Plutarch, puts him in the place
Of Roman, Grecian; draws the patched gown close,
Dreams, 'Thus should I fight, save, or rule the world!'—
Then smilingly, contentedly, awakes
To the old solitary nothingness.
So I, from such communion, pass content—

"O great, just, good God! Miserable me!"

Solemn, intent, sympathetic were the faces of all when
the testimony of Pompilia was read. Then the Court gave
swift decree: Count Franceschini and his four hirelings
were guilty and were condemned to be executed in the
public square.

For just this exigency Guido had a shot reserved—those
three or four minor orders he had taken in the Church in
his youth to gain political preferment. The Advocate Hya-
cinthus appealed:

POMPILIA AND HER POET

"My client boasts the clerkly privilege;
Has taken minor orders, so he slips
Your power, the temporal, slides inside the robe
Of Mother Church; to her we make appeal
By the Pope, the Church's Head!"

This privilege could not be denied. To the Pope went the long written documents of each advocate.

Meanwhile Pompilia who had borne so much mental torture that mere physical pain seemed trifling in comparison, lay patiently waiting while her life ebbed out. In the three days since the murder she had set her affairs in order and told the truth so that she knew men must believe it from her dying lips. Her property had been secured to an old friend, Domenico Tighetti, in trust for the child Gaetano. Now her last hours had come and she worried a little because her son would never know his mother and must depend on rumor for all knowledge of her:

"How happy those are who know how to write!
Such could write what their son should read in time,
Had they a whole day to live out like me.
. I hope he will regard
The history of me as what some one dreamed,
And get to disbelieve it at the last,
Since to myself it dwindles fast to that—
Sheer dreaming and impossibility.
. Thus all my life
Looks old, fantastic, and impossible:
I touch a fairy thing that fades and fades—
Even to my babe! One cannot judge
Of what has been the ill or well of life,
The day that one is dying. Sorrows change
Into not altogether sorrow-like;
I do see strangeness but scarce misery.
Yes, everybody that leaves life sees all
Softened and bettered: so with other sights.
To me at least was never evening yet
But seemed far beautifuller than its day,
For past is past."

"NO WORK BEGUN SHALL EVER PAUSE FOR DEATH"

Step by step she reviews her life with sharpened, death-facing vision. In the end she muses on the fate of her husband:

"Let him make God amends—none, none to me
Who thank him, rather, that, whereas strange fate
Mockingly styled him husband and me wife,
Himself this way at least pronounced divorce. . . .
We shall not meet in this world or the next,
But where will God be absent? In His face
Is light, but in His shadow healing too:
Let Guido touch the shadow and be healed!
I could not love him—but his mother did.

"Ah! friends, I thank and bless you every one!
No more now: I withdraw from earth and man
To my own soul, compose myself for God.

"Well, and there is more! Yes, my end of breath
Shall bear away my soul in being true!
He is still here, not outside with the world. . . .
The heart and the immeasurable love
Of my one friend, my only, all my own,
Who put his breast between the spears and me.
Ever with Caponsacchi! Otherwise
Here alone would be failure, loss to me—
How much more loss to him with life debarred
From giving life, love locked from love's display,
The day-star stopped its task that makes night morn!

"O lover of my life, O soldier saint,
No work begun shall ever pause for death!
Love will be helpful to me more and more
In the coming course, the new path I must tread—
My weak hand in thy strong hand, strong for that!
Tell him that if I seem without him now,
That's the world's insight! Oh, he understands!

"He is at Civita—do I once doubt
The world again is holding us apart?
He had been here, displayed in my behalf
The broad brow that reverberates the truth,
And flashed the word God gave him back to man!

POMPILIA AND HER POET

I know where the free soul has flown! My fate
Will have been hard for even him to bear;
Let it confirm him in the trust of God. . . .

"It was the name of him I sprang to meet
When came the knock, the summons and the end.
'My great heart, my strong hand are back again!' . . .
He is ordained to call and I to come!
Do not the dead wear flowers when dressed for God?
Say—I am all in flowers from head to foot. . . .
At this supreme of moments! He is a priest;
I think he would not marry if he could.
Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,
In heaven we have the real and true and sure. . . .
When the true time is: here we have to wait
Not so long either! Could we by a wish
Have what we will and get the future now,
Would we wish aught done undone in the past?

"So let him wait God's instant men call years;
Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,
Do out the duty! Through such souls alone
God stooping shows sufficient of His light
For us in the dark to rise by. And I rise."

JUDGMENT

THE fate of the five criminals lay in the hands of that wise old Pope—

"Who had trod many lands, known many deeds,
 Probed many hearts, beginning with his own,
 And now was far in readiness for God.
 In the plain closet where he does such work,
 With, from all Peter's treasury, one stool,
 One table, and one wooden crucifix,
 There sits the Pope, his thoughts for company."

Carefully, intently he read the long pleas through. Finally he laid them down and sat musing. From time to time he would rise and take a turn around the room, or take a huge tome down from a shelf to consult a passage, over which he would nod solemnly. Or he would go to the window and look out, absently visioning the faces and lives of those involved in this heart-sickening tragedy. All the philosophy his long years had accumulated concentrated on this miniature of human passions brought to him for judgment.

He reviewed Guido's life as a man of "great birth, good breeding, with the Church for guide". Naturally he had met some obstacles which should have proved his strength to make stumbling-blocks his stepping-stones. But he had shown that he believed "in just the vile of life". He had been frustrated only because God had given Pompilia a purity of soul which would not take pollution:

"Such was the gift of God who showed for once
 How He would have the world go white."

Then when the child was born Guido saw a way still to sate his greed by destroying the three who stood between him and the gold, and so had bathed himself in blood to

POMPILIA AND HER POET

accomplish his evil desire. Even worse was that "fox-faced horrible priest, the Abate". He and his hybrid loathsome brother, Girolamo, would in due time be judged, as well as that gaunt grey nightmare, their mother, who had made no gesture to curb their cruelty. He would himself deal with the Archbishop who had stretched no hand of aid to the poor lamb that panted at his door. A bolt from heaven should sere and scar these miscreants!

In such black darkness thank God for one stray beauty-beam!

"Such I pronounce Pompilia, then as now
Perfect in whiteness. Stoop thou down, my child,
Give one good moment to the poor old Pope
Heart-sick at having all his world to blame.
. Everywhere
I see in the world the intellect of man—
That sword; the energy, his subtle spear;
The knowledge which defends him like a shield—
Everywhere; but they make not up, I think,
The marvel of a soul like thine, earth's flower
She holds up to the softened gaze of God!

"It was not given to Pompilia to know much,
Speak much, to write a book, to move mankind,
Be memorized by who records my time.
Yet if in purity and patience, if
In faith held fast despite the plucking fiend,
Safe like the signet stone with the new name
That saints are known by;—if in right returned
For wrong, most pardon for worst injury,
If there be any virtue, any praise,—
Then will this woman-child have proved—who knows?—
Just the one prize vouchsafed unworthy me,
Seven years a gardener of the untoward ground
I till My flower,
My rose, I gather for the breast of God.
. Go past me
And get thy praise,—and be not far to seek
Presently when I follow if I may!"

JUDGMENT

As for Caponsacchi, the warrior-priest, the Pope decides:

" Much I find amiss
Blameworthy, punishable in this freak
Of thine, this youth prolonged, though age was ripe,
This masquerade in sober day.
I rather chronicle the healthy rage,—
When the first moan broke from the martyr-maid
At that uncaging of the beasts—made bare
My athlete on the instant, gave such good
Great undisguised leap over post and pale
Right into the mid-cirque, free fighting-place.
Thank heaven as I do! Ay, such championship
Of God at first blush, such prompt cheery thud
Of glove on ground that answers ringingly
The challenge of the false knight,—watch we long
And wait we vainly for its gallant like.

" In thought, word, and deed
How throughout all thy warfare thou wast pure
I find it easy to believe. Was the trial sore?
Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!
Why comes temptation but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
And so be pedestalled in triumph? Pray
'Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!'
Yea, but O Thou whose servants are the bold,
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
Reluctant dragons up to who dares fight,
That so he may do battle and have praise!

. Well done!
Be glad thou hast let light into the world,
Through that irregular breach of the boundary—see
The same upon thy path and march assured,
Learning anew the use of soldiership,
Self-abnegation, freedom from all tear,
Loyalty to the life's end! Ruminating,
Deserve the initiatory spasm,—once more
Work, be unhappy but bear life, my son!"

He reflects for a moment on Pompilia's parents, betrayed
by honest love into deceit and greed:

POMPILIA AND HER POET

"Never again elude the choice of tints!
White shall not neutralize the black, nor good
Compensate bad in man, absolve him so:
Life's business being just the terrible choice."

Last of all he considers the plea of Guido again and places himself in the position of those who will criticise his verdict. Finally he sighs and shakes his head, then draws a sheet of paper toward him and writes:

" 'On receipt of this command
Acquaint Count Guido and his fellows four
They die tomorrow.
But since the man is noble, and his peers
By predilection haunt the People's Square,
There let him be beheaded in the midst,
And his companions hanged on either side:
So shall the quality see, fear, and learn.
Let there be prayer incessant for the five.'

"For the main criminal I have no hope
Except in such a suddenness of fate.
I stood at Naples once, a night so dark
I could have scarce conjectured there was earth
Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all.
But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
Thunder struck blow on blow,
There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.
So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see one instant and be saved.
Else I avert my face, nor follow him
Into that sad obscure sequestered state
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul
He else made first in vain; which must not be.
Enough, for I may die this very night:
And how should I dare die, this man let live?"

That night to the cell of Guido in the New Prison by Castle Angelo went Cardinal Acciaiuoli and Abate Panciatichi. There they crouched through the long hours on a

JUDGMENT

stone bench with the dungeon straw up to their knees. Shocked, awestruck, they were forced to listen, unable to stem the tide of Guido's eloquence as he poured forth a flood of protestations of innocence, arguments, explanations; scurrilous torrents of slander, sarcasm, blasphemy, defiance. They told their beads, they tried to hold the crucifix up to his gaze, but he paid no heed. His voice rang out:

"You have my last word,—innocent am I
As Innocent my Pope and murderer;
Innocent as a babe, as Mary's own,
As Mary's self,—I said, say, and repeat."

The shocked clerics crossed themselves with horror.

". Whose fault—
Grant that I am one huge and sheer mistake?
Not mine, at least, who did not make myself!

"My wife, rapid, insipid, harmless nullity!
Ever that same stone strength of white despair!

"I do get strength from being thrust to wall.
Do best to end so,—give earth spectacle
Of a brave fighter who succumbs to odds
That turn defeat to victory.
My honor spotless!

"Cardinal, take away your crucifix!
Abate, leave my lips alone! They bite!"

At last he stood up, threw out his arms and cried:

"I lived and died a man and take man's chance!—
Honest and bold! Right will be done to such!"

Outside in the stone corridors the Brotherhood of Death had gathered—black hatted, black hooded, black rosaries dangling from each girdle, skull-cross-bones banner spread,—all ready to intone the "De Profundis" as soon as the signal should come from the cell that Guido had confessed his sins. No signal came. At last they started in solemn march toward his door. Guido, arrested in his defiant challenge, heard the relentless shuffle of their footsteps, the

POMPILIA AND HER POET

ominous sound of their voices chanting his doom. In that instant he was reduced to a quivering wretch who shrieked:

"Who are these you have let descend my stair?
Ha, their accursed psalm! Lights at the sill!
Is it 'Open' they dare bid you? Treachery!
Sirs, have I spoken one word all this while
Out of the world of words I had to say?
Not one word! All was folly—I laughed and mocked!
Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,
Is—save me notwithstanding! Life is all!
I was just stark mad,—let the madman live
Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!
Don't open! Hold them from me! I am yours,
I am the Granduke's—no, I am the Pope's!
Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God,——"

With that last agonized appeal there floats before his frenzied vision the face of the one pure, beautiful being his soiled life has known:

"POMPILIA, will YOU let them murder me?"

Bravo, Guido! You did have that lightning flash of vision at the last! A lovely life, lived with unflinching fidelity to its highest instincts, is unbounded in its influence and deathless in its power. Pompilia would have helped you—if she could!

PART TWO

THE POET

"'Tis the man who with a man
Is an equal, be he King
Or poorest of the beggar clan,
Or any other wondrous thing
A man may be 'twixt ape and Plato.
'Tis the man who with a bird,
Wren or Eagle, finds his way to
All its instincts; he hath heard
The Lion's roaring, and can tell
What his horny throat expresseth,
And to him the Tiger's yell
Comes articulate and presseth
On his ear like mother-tongue."

JOHN KEATS

HEREDITY

ROBERT BROWNING's exceptional gifts could hardly have been handed down from his yeomen ancestors. He was the fourth Robert in direct line, the first distinct personality among them being his hard-headed grandfather who pushed his way from a clerkship to a responsible post in the Bank of England. Certainly not from him could the boy have inherited literary talent, for the old man's one idea of reading was to go straight through the Bible and Fielding's *Tom Jones* every year, and artistic sensibility was to him a thing unknown. On learning that his eldest son, Robert, the poet's father, was to marry a Miss Wiedemann of Scotch-German extraction, he visited her uncle and advised him not to throw away his niece "on a man so evidently born to be hanged"!

The crimes for which he thus stigmatized his son were artistic proclivities and independence of spirit. The young lad had yearned to be a painter and drawings that he left behind prove that he had marked natural ability. His amazed father disapproved with strong language. Young Robert then pleaded for a university education to satisfy his passionate love of books. This also was violently tabooed and the lad packed off to the West Indies to manage the estate he had inherited from his mother. At first he was happy in the drowsy, exotic climate — happy until the miseries of the slave system dawned upon him. He did not hesitate for he was not the sort to compromise with his convictions. Promptly he freed every slave and divided his plantation to give each one a home of his own. Then he set out for England, no longer a West Indian planter.

His autocratic old Tory father greeted him with rage, banished him from home and sent him a bill for every cent the lad had cost him, even for his mother's doctor and

POMPILIA AND HER POET

hospital bills when he was born! Instantly the young man turned over every shilling left of his mother's fortune to discharge the obligation and received a formal receipt from his implacable parent. At twenty-two the poet's father abandoned his own artistic dreams to enter the Bank of England as a clerk.

Here he remained until he retired from active business in 1853, but he always thoroughly detested the thralldom of a business career. However, his soul flew free of fetters and he taught his only son that the things of the spirit are of chief moment in life. Like many another father he passed on to his son with keen gratification the torch he himself was not permitted to light, and the years of his old age, illumined by its brilliant rays, were made glad by the consciousness that in the distinguished poet he himself had achieved immortality.

The joy of giving outlet to pent-up yearnings began with his early training of his son's mind. He sang Baby Robert to sleep by chanting Greek poetry; later he taught him English words and Latin declensions by setting them to rhyme. The house was lined with books, and the father could go anywhere at night in the dark to select the two or three he wanted to bring to the lighted room. He could tell anybody in what old bookshop throughout London he would be likely to find any rare book and the probable price. Detective stories were his delight and he would have been a genius in Scotland Yard, which is perhaps why his son possessed the instinct years later to dig out from "the square old book with crumpled yellow covers" picked up in a Roman book stall, those bare facts which his imagination lifted into his immortal classic.

In *Development*, one of the last poems Browning wrote in his old age, his mind, as so often happens with the elderly, lived over once more the events of his childhood and dwelt on his father's eager wisdom and wise comradeship:

HEREDITY

"My Father was a scholar and knew Greek.
When I was five years old, I asked him once
'What do you read about?'

"The siege of Troy.'

'What is a siege and what is Troy?'

Whereat

He piled up chairs and tables for a town,
Set me a-top for Priam, called our cat
Helen, enticed away from home (he said)
By wicked Paris, who couched somewhere close
Under the footstool, being cowardly,
But whom—since she was worth the pains, poor puss—
Towzer and Tray,—our dogs, the Atreidai,—sought
By taking Troy to get possession of
—Always when great Achilles ceased to sulk,
(My pony in the stable)—forth would prance
And put to flight Hector—our page-boy's self.
This taught me who was who and what was what;
So far I rightly understood the case
At five years old: a huge delight it proved
And still proves—thanks to that instructor sage
My father, who knew better than turn straight
Learning's full glare on weak-eyed ignorance,
Or worse yet, leave weak eyes to grow sand-blind,
Content with darkness and vacuity."

Two or three years later this companionable father urged the boy to read Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad* as a substitute until he was able to read him in the original Greek. The lad obeyed and not long after translated bits of Ossian and Horace into crude verse, hiding the attempts under the cushion of an arm chair. At twelve he tried to find a publisher for his first bulky manuscript, *Incondita*, but was unsuccessful and it was afterward destroyed.

This sounds as if the boy were so precocious as to be in a class apart from ordinary youngsters when in truth he was by no means all embryo poet and voracious devourer of books. A childish diary asserted complacently: "Married two wives this morning." Certainly a human sentiment! And young Robert was a handsome, active, husky, impetu-

POMPILIA AND HER POET

ous boy of many varied interests, else in later years he would not have possessed his rugged power to transmute the commonplace of everyday life into immortal verse. Probably no other poet except Shakespeare has ever touched so many sides of humanity with warm, keen understanding.

The youngster sang, danced, rode, boxed, and fenced. He made fast friends with other boys, some of whom remained his friends all through life. One of these was Alfred Domett, afterward the poet and statesman of New Zealand, whose sudden unannounced disappearance for thirty years from England in 1842 Browning celebrated in that fascinating poem:

"What's become of Waring
Since he gave us all the slip,
Chose land-travel or seafaring,
Boots and chest or staff and scrip,
Rather than pace up and down
Any longer London town?"

Rarely has the friendship of two men been so delightfully immortalized by a poet, and as this was one of the earlier lyrics, Browning thus revealed at any early age his positive genius for friendship and love. He ends:

". Oh, never star
Was lost here but it rose afar!
Look East, where whole new thousands are!
In Vishnu-land, what Avatar?"

However during his early boyhood the great outlet for Robert's passionate affection was the love of animals, a love that lasted on and influenced his verse. His mother early learned that if she wanted him to take a dose of medicine he was sure to demand that she pay him for the favor he was doing her by giving him a new speckled frog! It was a familiar sight to see her scurrying about in neighboring gardens to capture the bribe! His menagerie included owls, monkeys, magpies, hedgehogs, an eagle, lizards, and snakes. He brought home hurt cats and half-frozen birds

HEREDITY

and nursed them back to health. This devotion to all living things, his nervous temperament, his spirituality, his love of music and skill at the piano, he inherited from his mother whom he later described as "a divine woman". From his father came his informal and really prodigious education, his passion for books and humanity. Both parents endowed him with keen sensibility and tenderness of heart. The combined wealth of endowment proved rich sustenance for the poet in the making.

GOD'S LAMP

MR. BROWNING's common sense training, his watchfulness and sympathetic pride in his son during these formative years, bore fruit as the lad grew older and proved to be a dreamer who recognized in himself the consciousness of power, the impulsion to create. Some sort of artist young Robert knew he must be. Although wanting avidly, as he tells us later on, to be a poet, a painter, and a musician, it finally dawned upon him that this life would be all too short for such a miraculous achievement, and in order to attain eminence in any one of the three arts, he must reluctantly face inevitable elimination. He therefore yielded to the strongest impulsion and chose to be a poet, but to the last his ardent spirit anticipated:

"Other heights in other lives, God willing."

His first act after this decision was made was to pitch in and read from beginning to end the much too learned tome of Doctor Johnson's dictionary! Then for a time he was captivated by the sweep and swing and rebellious fulminations of Byron's poetry. Of this fascination he later wrote:

"I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his hair or one of his gloves—while Heaven knows that I could not get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were condensed into the little china bottle yonder." This naturally was long before he met Wordsworth and became his friend.

The admiration for Byron was short lived and doomed to yield to a veneration which lasted on through all his maturer years. His developing intellect demanded more stimulating sustenance. One day during his thirteenth year he stumbled on a book lying neglected on a London stall. The title was *Mr. Shelley's Atheistical Poems—Very Scarce*. He read

GOD'S LAMP

Queen Mab and other poems with rapture, but could find no one in his circle of acquaintances who seemed to know more of the poet than that he had been drowned in Italy four years before. There was religious tolerance in this evangelical household, for when his mother realized his ardent admiration and complete absorption in the "Sun-Treader", she secured for him at the cost of some time and trouble all the available works of the supposedly atheistical poet and his friend Keats. From them he learned with awe and delight the magic power of the immortals to lift reality into the realm of the ideal, and to bridge the space from earth to the skies.

Percy Bysshe Shelley became his adoration and inspiration:

"Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you,
And did you answer him again?
How strange it seems and new!

"But you were living before that,
And also you are living after;
And the memory I started at—
My starting moves your laughter!

"I crossed a moor with a name of its own
And a certain use in the world, no doubt,
Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
'Mid the blank miles round about.

"For there I picked up in the heather,
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle feather!
Well, I forget the rest."

Robert's wise father, keeping in mind his own disappointment that his youthful yearnings for an artistic career had been thwarted by his hard-headed parent, yielded keen and enthusiastic support to his son's determination to undertake what an old woman in the Lake District, referring to "Mr. Wudsworth", designated as "the po'try business". There was at no time a great deal of money in the Browning

POMPILIA AND HER POET

family, but what there was never was stinted in matters which concerned books or the making of a poet. One hopes Mr. Browning knew those words of Mosleh Eddin Saadi, the spirit of which he so delightfully exemplified:

"If of thy mortal goods thou art bereft
And from thy slender store two loaves alone
to thee are left,
Sell one, and with the dole
Buy hyacinths to feed thy soul."

Anyhow, Robert's Aunt Silverthorne bore the cost of the anonymous publication of *Pauline* in 1833, and later his father paid the expenses for *Paracelsus*, *Sordello*, and *Bells and Pomegranates*.

Naturally in his first long poem deemed worthy of publication, the brilliant and versatile youth of twenty must work off something of the autobiographical surge of his early spiritual struggles and his devotion to "Sun-Treader" Shelley. He must unlock the tumultuous recesses of his soul "before he can sing". Thus the lover in *Pauline*, yielding to the extravagances and fanaticism of a lonely, self-centered soul, ranged over the universe and chafed at even these limitations.

Under the youthful incoherence, *Pauline* was a work of tremendous promise although it attracted little attention at the time. Seventeen years later one other youth, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, himself destined for immortality, found the copy, deposited in the British Museum, pored over it with the joy of discovery, then copied it laboriously for his own retention from beginning to end. He believed that this anonymous work must have been written by the author of *Paracelsus* and wrote to Browning to inquire. Thereupon Browning, who had thought very slightly of this bantling, set himself to work to revise it so it might appear in his collected poems.

A year or so before his death Browning was interested, even amused to learn that twenty-five guineas had been

GOD'S LAMP

paid at a public auction for a copy of this first edition for whose publication his Aunt Silverthorne had paid three pounds, fifteen shillings. With a twinkle in his eye Browning remarked that he wished the dear old lady were alive so he could pay her back the cost of her faith in her nephew. What would aunt and poet have felt could they have known that in the year 1929 at the sale of Mr. Jerome Kern's library in New York City, one of the eleven copies of this edition of *Pauline* still extant would be sold for sixteen thousand dollars?

For a time the young man flirted with the idea of a diplomatic career, even spending the winter of 1833-34 as a secretary in the office of the Russian Consul-General in Saint Petersburg. On his return to England he started *Paracelsus*, the history of a lofty soul who sought the unattainable, who fell bruised and broken, then rose out of defeat to ultimate victory.

" I have lived.
We have to live alone to set forth well
God's praise,
To trace love's first beginnings in mankind,
To know even hate is but a mask of love's;
To see a good in evil and a hope
In ill success.
And do our best to climb and get to Him.
. If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; its splendor, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day."

The youth of twenty-two here sets the pace toward that sturdy optimism which dominated his poetry and his life on to that last rugged battle cry which ended *Asolando*, published on the day of his death.

The influence of Shelley is still operative in *Paracelsus* and there is also a song that suggests Keats:

POMPILIA AND HER POET

"And strew faint sweetness from some old
Egyptian's fine moth-eaten shroud
Which breaks to dust when once unrolled;
Or shredded perfume, like a cloud
From closet long to quiet vowed,
With moth and dropping arras hung,
Mouldering her lute and books among,
As when a queen, long dead, was young."

This poet had already entered the magic circle where his soul was henceforward to dwell among those who live by the visions they see and the dreams they dream. *Paracelsus* is flushed with the warm, divine glow which invariably illumines the youth of genius before the problems of maturity have had time to bear down upon him and confuse the vision of:

". The eternal silence: truths that wake
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness nor mad endeavor,
Nor man nor boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy."

YOUNG WINGS

SHORTLY after Browning had completed *Paracelsus* he started a longer, more involved poem, *Sordello*, the story of the spiritual life of an early Italian poet:

" What he should have been,
 Could be, and was not. A sorry farce
 Such life is, after all!"

From 1835 on to its publication in 1840, he gave what time he could comfortably to this work in the intervals between interesting interruptions. The result was one of his longest and most obscure poems, so obscure that the ordinary healthy minded admirer of Browning's verse has to commandeer all his courage to tackle it and runs the risk of deciding that the hero is the victim of disordered nerves.

Obscurity has frequently been charged against Browning and it is interesting "to see how it started". A critic stated that he found it impossible to read *Paracelsus* because of its "verbosity". Much concerned, the young poet began to write out in prose what he wanted to say; then, in turning it into verse, he pruned out all unnecessary words. Unfortunately he was much too thorough-going and assumed that the reader's intelligence would always equal his own. He leaps blithely from subject to verb across a chasm of parenthesis, compresses involved thoughts into mere exclamations, and in various other ways loses that sense of readers and listeners which the artist can never afford to forget. One sighs for the earlier verbosity!

Although Browning was never willing to acknowledge that any insuperable obscurity existed in his poetry, he laughed heartily when stories of its effect on his readers were brought to him and used to pass them on in great glee to his friends. Such stories abounded after the publication of *Sordello*.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

A French critic quoted the poet's words, "God gave man two faculties" and commented: "I wish while He was about it He had given him a third, namely, the power to understand Mr. Browning."

Tennyson read it with growing dismay and asserted, we trust with hypobole: "There were only two lines I understood and they were both lies; they were the opening and the closing lines,—'Who will may hear Sordello's story told,' and 'Who would has heard Sordello's story told!'"

Carlyle also had his little joke: "My wife has read through *Sordello* without being able to make out whether Sordello was a man, or a city, or a book."

But Browning's favorite story was that of the wit and critic, Douglas Jerrold, who tried to plod through the poem when he was recovering from a serious illness. At last consternation gripped him. Had his illness destroyed his brain? Sinking back on the sofa he cried, "Oh, God! I am an idiot!" His wife entered the room and he eagerly passed the book to her, watching her face as she read. When she exclaimed, "Why, this is gibberish!" Jerrold raised his eyes to heaven and exulted: "Oh, God! I am *not* an idiot!"

Browning himself said in later years that when he wrote this poem, two knew what it meant—"God and Robert Browning. Now God alone knows."

Other faults there are as the poet tries out his apprentice hand. His sense of restraining humor has not yet developed, his human beings are too abstract, we see machinery that should be invisible. He explains too much and forgets that the highest poetry is never didactic. Yet gems occasionally sparkle and gleam from the pages:

" as if that chestnut, think,
Should yearn for this first larch-bloom, crisp and pink,
Or those pale fragrant tears where zephyrs stanch
March wounds along the fretted pine tree branch!"

"Up and up goes he, singing all the while
Some unintelligible words to beat
The lark, God's poet, swooning at his feet."

YOUNG WINGS

This last is worthy to be placed with that later gem from *Home-Thoughts from Abroad*:

"That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!"

Also of course, Browning being Browning, the moral lesson of man's responsibility to force his will to make the definite choice between good and evil must be emphasized:

"Must life be ever just escaped, which should
Have been enjoyed?—nay, might have been and would,
Each purpose ordered right."

During those years in which he was working on *Sordello*, the poet was reaping the result on the intellectual high lights of his day of the publication of *Paracelsus*. Congenial friends began to open out delightful social contacts. Chief among them were the historians, Carlyle and John Forster; poets like Leigh Hunt and Wordsworth, the latter being forty years older than Browning; also Charles Dickens, Walter Savage Landor, Macready the actor, and Talfourd, the playwright. Under the warmth of their appreciation and the intercourse of an enlarged social life, the poet developed and expanded so that he was liked tremendously as a man instead of being merely tolerated as a gifted genius, the case so often with artistic people who have not the flair for social amenities.

Macready said in his diary: "He looks and speaks more like a youthful poet than any other man I ever saw," and Browning's portraits of that period certainly bear out this estimate, even though long hair did not then of necessity place a man under the suspicion of being an artistic eccentric. He was of medium height, youthfully slender, and very graceful in his movements. His abundant hair was dark brown and wavy; his eyes and mouth singularly expressive; his entire face mobile, and his voice resonant and musical. One friend spoke of him as "a quivering, high-bred, sensitive animal". Another describes him as:

POMPILIA AND HER POET

" just a trifle of a dandy, addicted to lemon-colored kid gloves and such things, quite 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form'. But full of ambition, eager for success, eager for fame, and what is more, determined to conquer fame and to achieve success."

The young man's love of animals persisted and his eye was an exact instrument in the measurement of all phenomena of nature, the sort that "would not have appeared despicable to a Seminole or an Iroquois". He never brooded on nature as Wordsworth did, but he absorbed facts and pushed sturdily beyond them to causes and meanings, both in the case of the so called lower animals and of his fellow human beings.

The first definite interruption to *Sordello* came after the initial performance of a play by Talfourd in May, 1836, when Browning was asked to supper afterward in the playwright's rooms with Macready, Wordsworth, and Landor. Macready said:

"Write me a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America!"

Browning, who had been working with Forster on the *Life of Strafford*, immediately proposed that hero as the subject for the play and set to work. A year later it was badly produced in Covent Garden with Macready acting the role of Strafford. It was received with a measure of enthusiasm as a notable work for a young man of twenty-five. Strafford, King Charles I., John Hampden, John Pym, all were conceived with historical accuracy, but Browning himself was dissatisfied, even though he had for the first time the pleasure of reading favorable notices in the London papers.

He resumed work on *Sordello* but possibly felt the need of knowing at first hand something of the hero's Italy. In any case he sailed the following spring as the only passenger on a freight ship. The food was uneatable, dirt and sickness were disgustingly rife, but his spirits were high, even jubilant at the opportunity to hobnob with sailors and enlarge his human contacts. Also he lost his heart for all time to Italy, the

YOUNG WINGS

" woman country, wooed, not wed;
Loved all the more by the Earth's male lands,
Laid to their hearts instead."

Sordello having appeared in 1840, the next six years were devoted to writing dramas and dramatic lyrics which appeared in eight cheap paper editions, selling for sixpence or a shilling. He named this collection *Bells and Pomegranates* from the adornments on the vestments of priests as described in the book of *Exodus*. The poet explained that he intended to typify the mixture of sound with sense, poetry with thought in his poems.

These years of dramatic work, whatever the disappointments and vexations consequent upon the conflict of wills inherent in stage production, were healthy and hearty years, rich with spend-thrift enjoyment of life. There was a second trip to Italy, another to Holland. Many hours were spent eagerly dipping into tomes preserved in the British Museum. During long gypsy-like rambles he rejoiced in delving into the workings of rough and simple humanity. All the time he was storing up a vast treasure house of knowledge and experience on which to draw later for his infinitely varied and dramatic portraits of men and women.

Pippa Passes comprised the first edition of *Bells and Pomegranates* in 1841. It is a gem and remains one of his best loved poems. Like all simple, beautiful revelations of life and character, it repays the profoundest study, and the oftener it is read the more alluring is its appeal to the imagination. Elizabeth Barrett told a friend that she knelt to this poem with the deepest reverence.

Pippa, the little Italian mill girl, goes forth for her one holiday in all the year determined to be happy in her dreams with the happiness of those whom her imagination pictures as the "happiest four in Asolo." Pausing under their windows she feeds her joyous impersonation by singing little songs, and these songs, all unknown to Pippa, smite into the consciousness of the four whom she envies at moments charged with dramatic tragedy and violently change the current of their lives. Under the semblance of four widely

POMPILIA AND HER POET

varying situations, Browning typifies what he regards as the controlling elements of all life. At night tired little Pippa, having caroled throughout the day her conviction that

"God's in his heaven,
All's right with the world,"

still quite unconscious of the fact that she has influenced any one at all, least of all the life of her nation, lies down to sleep:

"God bless me! I can pray no more tonight."

The poet has found himself at last! This poetical exaltation of the truth that all human lives interlock, even those of the lowly and the lonely, so that there is a consequent responsibility for each individual to order his own life so it may resound for good, is set forth by the master hand of a poet who needs no further apprenticeship. Who cares if he gives the humble child the reasoning power of a sage, gives her the reflections Browning himself would have had in her stead? It is the avowed mission of the poet "to see as God sees" all that lies in embryo; to say what even the humblest human being would say if inchoate greatness could rise on wings of speech.

Of these early dramas two others have simple, gripping stories, *A Blot in the Scutcheon*, and *Colombe's Birthday*. The first is the tragedy of Nemesis overtaking the innocent, and the description of the heroine is sheer music:

There's a woman like a dew-drop, she's so purer than
the purest;
And her noble heart's the noblest, yes, and her sure
faith's the surest;
And her eyes are dark and humid, like the depth on
depth of lustre
Hid i'the harebell, while her tresses, sunnier than the
wild-grape cluster,
Gush in golden-tinged plenty down her neck's rose-
mistimed marble:
Then her voice's music . . . call it the well's bubbling,
the bird's warble!"

YOUNG WINGS

In Colombe's Birthday, on the contrary, the spiritual conflict of that graceful and winning heroine holds no note of tragedy. She fights the fight between material claims and her heart's promptings, joyfully signs away her duchy, and chooses love.

King Victor and King Charles, The Return of the Druses, Luria; and a Soul's Tragedy strike a less popular note. In fact all these dramas in reality taught Browning that any thought of stage presentation hampered his genius; that his mission was to transmute the concrete facts of life into the pure golden portraiture of lyric and dramatic poems.

Somewhat deprecatingly he refers to the shorter poems he wrote during these years as "mere escapes of my inner power, like the light of a revolving lighthouse leaping out at intervals from a narrow chink." To the student of his poetry they are also the testing ground where he tried out and determined the quality of his genius.

Some of them abound in sheer physical zest, like *How They brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix* and *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. Exuberant youthful joy has rarely been more nobly depicted than in that early fragment which he was afterward to develop into one of his best loved poems, *Saul*:

"Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock
up to rock,
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the
cool silver shock
Of the plunge in the pool's living water, the hunt of
the bear,
And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in
his lair.
And the meal, the rich dates yellowed over with gold
dust divine,
And the locust-flesh steeped in the pitcher, the full
draught of wine,
And the sleep in the dried river-channel where bul-
rushes tell
That the water was wont to go warbling so softly
and well.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

How good is man's life, the mere living! How fit
to employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses forever
in joy!"

Then again, in such poems as *Porphyria's Lover* and *In a Gondola* there is tragic insight and dramatic condensation. The whole history of two human lives is crowded into the pleasant cynicism of *My Last Duchess* where the Duke exhibits with the joy of a collector the portrait of his wife whom he has killed from sheer boredom at her superficiality:

"..... she liked what e'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere."

There is a breathless swing of melody in *Waring* and also in that flash of boyish impudence, *The Lost Leader*, where the young poet laments that Wordsworth in his old age has abandoned his political party and accepted as Poet Laureate the silver of royal preferment.

"Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat
We that had loved him so, followed him, honored him,
Lived in his mild, magnificent eye,
Learned his great language, caught his clear accents,
Made him our pattern to live and to die!
Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us,
Burns, Shelley, were with us, they watch from their
graves!

He alone breaks from the van and the freemen,
He alone sinks to the rear and the slaves.
Blot out his name then, record one lost soul more,
One more task declined, one more footpath untrod,
One more devil's-triumph and sorrow for angels,
One wrong more to man, one more insult to God!"

However Browning's tender heart does not leave his former friend without hope. Wordsworth is to work out his salvation—

"..... and wait us
Pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne!"

YOUNG WINGS

It is interesting to read his early love poem, *Cristina*, published as it was three years before the famous meeting with Elizabeth Barrett. He sings love for love's sake only,—the passion of the human soul toward an ideal of its own fashioning, born of the soul's need to love wholly and nobly. An ardent, sensitive youth exchanged glances with *Cristina* and love sprang up instant and complete, a love that was its own reward:

"There are flashes struck from midnights,
There are fireflames noondays kindle,
Whereby piled-up honors perish,
Whereby swollen ambitions dwindle,
While just this or that poor impulse,
Which for once had play unstified,
Seems the sole work of a lifetime,
That away the rest have trifled.

"Doubt you if, in some such moment,
As she fixed me, she felt clearly,
Ages past the soul existed,
Here an age 'tis resting merely,
And hence fleets again for ages,
While the true end, sole and single,
It stops here for is, this love-way,
With some other soul to mingle?

"Else it loses what it lived for,
And eternally must lose it;
Better ends may be in prospect,
Deeper blisses (if you choose it)
But this life's end and this love-bliss
Have been lost here. Doubt you whether
This she felt as, looking at me
Mine and her souls rushed together?"

At the age of thirty Browning had attained a philosophy concerning the love between man and woman. Fortunately he was soon to realize his ideal. Is it any wonder that his instantaneous love for Elizabeth Barrett on their first meeting should seem to him "the triumph of a prophecy?"

PREDESTINATION

"MADE for each other" was the way their friends always expressed their reaction in later years after paying a visit to the Brownings, and the more we study the early life of Elizabeth Barrett, the surer we are that Robert Browning proved in his own experience his words:

" God above
Is great to grant as mighty to make
And creates the love to reward the love."

Although, as we have seen, the poet wove into the fabric of his loveliest creation, Pompilia, the wonder of the woman who completely answered all the yearnings of his heart and soul, yet the lives of two young girls could hardly have been more unlike than those of Elizabeth Barrett and Pompilia Comparini.

The English girl was sheltered to an unusual degree from the stress and vulgarities of life. Born on March sixth, 1806, she was thus six years older than Robert Browning as well as the eldest of a family of eleven children. From the first her younger brothers and sisters seem to have divined that Elizabeth was somehow "different", and they accordingly treated her with an almost reverential love and deference. When she was eight years old she read Homer to her dolls and took her darling books out to enjoy the fresh air! She worked in her own especial rose garden, collected bugs, and played with her pets like any normal child. It is interesting to recall that it was at eight also that her future husband read Homer in Pope's translation, and to realize that both found their childish adorations and inspiration in Greek heroes and writers.

Even before she was eight, Elizabeth had begun to write poetry which she concealed under the mattress of her bed;

PREDESTINATION

in fact she dedicated her life to writing it. Perhaps it would be truer to say she realized that she had been born dedicated, as Beethoven must have realized or Michael Angelo. Again like young Robert she wrote a book at the age of twelve, an epic called *The Battle of Marathon*. While Robert's poems of this tender age never saw print, her doting father had fifty copies of her poem printed, one of which is in the British Museum while another was sold, like the first edition of *Pauline*, in New York in 1929, only for a higher price, seventeen thousand, five hundred dollars.

Although Mr. Edward Barrett Moulton-Barrett had a genuine pride in his eldest daughter's genius, he was an exacting Lord of the Manor with a mania for dominance which reduced his off-spring to the subservience of slaves. This mania became even stronger after he was angered by the freeing of his own slaves in the West Indies by legal enactment. So long as his sons and daughters rendered this subservience he was inclined to be an indulgent parent, but let his will be questioned or crossed and he would either sulk for days or break into maniacal fury that exceeded all bounds. Consequently he was invariably humored by his children and proceeded on his way for the most part with undamaged self esteem.

Much of her earnestness Elizabeth must have derived from this father who was an active social reformer. From what more remote ancestor she inherited her delicious sense of humor and natural buoyancy, we do not know. Her mother seems to have been a kindly, neutral soul who endured her husband, bore him eleven children, and then gently passed out of life. In a letter which Elizabeth wrote to Robert Browning in 1845, she acknowledges her own ardent, impatient temperament even as a child. Referring to her Italian master she writes:

"Of course the signor meant headlong!—and now I have had enough to tame me and might be expected to stand still in my stall. But you see I do not. Headlong I was at first, and headlong I continue,—precipitately rushing forward through all manner of nettles and

POMPILIA AND HER POET

briers instead of keeping the path; guessing at the meaning of unknown words instead of looking into the dictionary,—tearing open letters and never untying a string,—and expecting everything to be done in a minute, and the thunder to be as quick as the lightning."

Poor Elizabeth! She was too headlong one day when she was fifteen, very sadly too headlong! Springing up to mount her pony "Moses," she fell from the saddle and that fall plunged the healthy, active girl into a semi-invalidism which lasted off and on all her life. This delicacy was intensified in 1838 by the bursting of a blood vessel. After this accident she was sent to Torquay to recuperate and with her went that one of her brothers whom she loved most devotedly. He was very tragically drowned, and the shock prostrated her for years, "with nerves that have been all broken on the rack and now hang loosely, quivering at a step or breath."

When she had sufficiently recovered after months of suffering, she returned to London and threw herself intensely into literary work in the upper room of her father's house at 50 Wimpole Street, hoping in that way to distract her mind from grief. There she lay on a sofa, surrounded always by her books and papers, her Greek dramatists and Elizabethan poets, writing industriously in her tiny handwriting on tiny sheets of paper. Very few were admitted to that room, but all who did come took fire from her ardent, beautiful soul. If her adventures were those of the spirit, her sallies of wit, her repartee, were those of a young woman in keen contact with life. Edgar Allan Poe sent her a volume of his poems, inscribed on the flyleaf, "To the Noblest of her Sex." "And what could I say in reply to that," she flashed, "except, 'Sir, you are the most discerning of yours!' " A letter of Poe's written on August ninth, 1846, was sold in the same 1929 auction in New York City for nineteen thousand dollars. In it Poe enthusiastically quotes Elizabeth Barrett's opinion of *The Raven*:

"There is one British opinion which I value very highly
—Miss Barrett's. She says: 'This vivid writing! This



ELIZABETH BARRETT IN EARLY YOUTH

PREDESTINATION

power which is felt! *The Raven* has produced a sensation—a "fit of horror" here in England. . . . I hear of persons haunted by the "Nevermore".'

Certainly no one ever visited that upper room and went away depressed by an invalid's gloom and self pity, but rather cheered and invigorated and with a clinging vision of a spiritually beautiful face with tender, large grey eyes, a delicate skin, and a mobile mouth which "smiled like sunshine". Because she wore her wealth of soft chestnut curls loose and free, she always seemed as young as her spirit which was to the last many years younger than the record of stern Anno Domini!

Before her accident in 1838 Elizabeth had begun to meet distinguished people, largely at the home of her dearly loved cousin, John Kenyon, whom Robert Browning dubbed "Kenyon the Magnificent". His home was always open to the intellectual aristocracy of his time. After meeting Mr. Wordsworth there one day, Elizabeth drily remarked: "He was very kind and let me listen to his conversation"—a sly and truthful thrust at the self-complacency of the great man. She loved her "real live poets with their heads full of the trees and birds and the sunshine of Paradise." They for their part found their fellow poet rather shy, frail, ultra-feminine, but instinct with arresting and abiding charm, with lovely surprises and unfailing repartee.

Elizabeth Barrett's early poems were promising but she did not at once attain to her full soul measure. Perhaps her first poem of real power is the one which almost fifty years later was to be chanted by the full vested choir of Westminster Abbey above the open grave of her husband:

"Of all the thoughts of God that are
Borne inward unto souls afar,
Along the psalmist's music deep,
Now tell me if there any is
For grace or gift surpassing this—
'He giveth His beloved, sleep'?"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

"What would we give to our beloved?
The hero's heart to be unmoved?
The poet's star-tuned harp to sweep?
The patriot's voice to teach and rouse?
The monarch's crown to light the brows?—
'He giveth His beloved, sleep.'

.

"His dews drop mutely on the hill,
His cloud above it saileth still,
Though on its slope men sow and reap.
More softly than the dew is shed,
Or cloud is floated overhead,
He giveth His beloved, sleep!"

.

"And friends, dear friends, when it shall be
That this low breath has gone from me,
And round my bier ye come to weep,
Let one, most loving of you all,
Say, 'Not a tear must o'er her fall—
He giveth His beloved, sleep!'"

Cowper's Grave is also a noble poem and so is *Rhapsody*
with its refrain:

"O Life, O Beyond,
Thou art strange, thou art sweet!"

Victoria's Tears won her loud acclaim:

" 'O maiden, heir of kings!
A king has left his place!
The majesty of death has swept
All other from his face!
And thou upon thy mother's breast
No longer lean adown,
But take the glory for the rest,
And rule the land that loves thee best!"
She heard and wept—
She wept to wear a crown!

.

PREDESTINATION

"God save thee, weeping Queen!
Thou shalt be well beloved!
The tyrant's sceptre cannot move
As those pure tears have moved!
The nature in thine eyes we see
That tyrants cannot own—
The love that guardeth liberties!
Strange blessing on the nation lies
Whose sovereign wept—
Yea, wept to wear its crown!

"God bless thee, weeping Queen,
With blessing more divine!
And fill with happier love than earth's
That tender heart of thine!
That when the thrones of earth shall be
As low as graves brought down;
A pierced hand may give to thee
The crown which angels shout to see!
Thou wilt not *weep*
To wear that heavenly crown!"

But it was with the publication of *The Dead Pan* that the poet entered into her kingdom. The swing of the verse, the ringing exultation of its noble sentiments rang true to the most exacting critics in England and America.

"Gods of Hellas, gods of Hellas,
Can ye listen in your silence?
Can your mystic voices tell us
Where ye hide? In floating islands
With a wind that evermore
Keeps you out of sight of shore?
Pan, Pan is dead."

There follow a number of stanzas of apostrophe to the different gods, then a cry filled with "eternity's despair" was heard:

"PAN IS DEAD—GREAT PAN IS DEAD—
PAN, PAN IS DEAD."

POMPILIA AND HER POET

" 'Twas the hour when One in Sion
Hung for love's sake on a cross—
When His brow was chill with dying,
And His soul was faint with loss;
When his priestly blood dropped downward,
And His kingly eyes looked throneward—
 Then, Pan was dead.

"By the love He stood alone in,
His sole Godhead stood complete:
And the false gods fell down moaning,
Each from off his golden seat—
All the false gods with a cry
Rendered up their deity—
 Pan, Pan was dead.

.

"Christ has sent us down the angels;
And the whole earth and the skies
Are illumed by altar candles
Lit for blessed mysteries:
And a Priest's Hand through creation,
Waveth calm and consecration—
 And Pan is dead.

"Truth is fair: should we forego it?
Can we sigh right for a wrong?
God Himself is the best Poet,
And the Real is His song.
Sing His truth out fair and full,
And secure His beautiful.
 Let Pan be dead.

"Truth is large. Our aspiration
Scarce embraces half we be.
Shame! to stand in His creation
And doubt Truth's sufficiency!
To think God's song unexcelling
The poor tales of our own telling—
 When Pan is dead.

PREDESTINATION

"What is true and just and honest,
What is lovely, what is pure—
All of praise that hath admonished—
All of virtue shall endure,—
These are themes for poets' uses,
Stirring nobler than the muses,
Ere Pan was dead.

"O brave poets, keep back nothing;
Nor mix falsehood with the whole!
Look up Godward! Speak the truth in
Worthy song from earnest soul!
Hold, in high poetic duty,
Truest Truth the fairest Beauty!
Pan, Pan is dead."

Not all of her poetry is serious. Gaiety sparkles through *A Man's Requirements*, a gaiety threaded with witty cynicism. For ten stanzas the man heaps up the riches of life and beauty and love he expects his sweetheart to shower upon him, and in return:

"Thus if thou wilt prove me, dear,
Woman's love no fable,
I will love *thee*—half a year,
As a man is able."

Plainly Elizabeth Barrett needed to be taught that the slow centuries had evolved one man who in all humbleness of spirit was to yearn and plead to be allowed to restore in her mind the balance of the sexes by showering upon her every wealth of love and devotion and tender care, asking nothing in return but the right to guard and cherish her life:

"Worth how well those dark grey eyes,
That hair so dark and dear, how worth
That a man should strive and agonize,
And taste a veriest hell on earth
For the hope of such a prize."

If ever predestination shaped two lives for the joining, these were the two! Already there existed between them the

POMPILIA AND HER POET

most binding community of interests. Versatility; eager "noble curiosity"; superb intellectual grasp and vigor; interest in everything living and on the printed page; healthy moral sense and acceptance of duty; warm, loving, self-sacrificing natures; extraordinary power to make and keep devoted friends; flashing wit in Elizabeth and a workable sense of humor in Robert; tolerance; natural buoyancy; invincible youth—so that Elizabeth died at fifty-five with the face and heart of a girl, while Robert possessed much of his boy's gusto when he died at seventy-seven—what a tragic loss to life and literature it would have been had these two failed to meet in the flesh! But John Kenyon saw to that and so passes into immortality as *Deus ex Machina* in the life of the Brownings!



ROBERT BROWNING. 1859
From a Drawing by Field Talfourd

LYRIC LOVE

WHEN Kenyon in 1841 showed the manuscript of his cousin's poem, *The Dead Pan*, to his young friend, Robert Browning, and listened to the expression of his ardent admiration after reading it, he suggested that he take the poet to call on Miss Barrett. Browning was pleased, but when the suggestion was passed on to Elizabeth she declined "from a blind dislike of seeing strangers." Once again Kenyon brought up the matter after she had told him of her enthusiastic delight over the poem *Pippa Passes*, but she still did not feel equal to meeting her fellow poet. However she began writing praise of "the high and gifted spirit" in critical articles which were published in the *Athenaeum*. Thus seeds were sown which were to germinate for three years, then bud and blossom into one of the noblest, most enduring and inspiring loves in history.

Late in December of 1844 Browning returned from Italy. His sister Sarianna had received from Mr. Kenyon a copy of the latest poems of Elizabeth Barrett and showed them to him. He read them with intense enjoyment and was especially thrilled by her reference to him in *Lady Geraldine's Courtship*:

"Or from Browning some 'pomegranate,' which if cut
 deep down the middle
 Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a
 veined humanity."

His exuberant pleasure overflowed in the first letter of their correspondence, written on January tenth, 1845. After his eager beginning, "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett," he goes on to tell her something of the effect they have had on his emotions. Then, "I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too. Do you know I was once not very far from seeing—really seeing

POMPILIA AND HER POET

you? You were too unwell, and I feel as if I had been close, so close, to some world's wonder in chapel or crypt, only a screen to push and I might have entered, but there was some slight and just sufficient bar to admission, and the half-opened door shut, and the sight was never to be?" Note the delicacy of that question mark!

Elizabeth confessed afterward that she was "thrown into ecstasies" when she received this letter. She began her answer immediately: "I thank you, dear Mr. Browning, from the bottom of my heart." It is a bright letter, written with the gentle restraint and delicate raillery which is found in most of the literary correspondence of the last mid-century when letter-writing was still an art. She begs him to tell her frankly the faults he finds in her poems: "Is it indeed true that I was so near the pleasure and honor of making your acquaintance? and can it be that you look back upon the lost opportunity with regret? Winters shut me up as they do the dormouse's eyes; in the spring *we shall see*."

He replies at once: "Your poetry must be, cannot but be, infinitely more to me than mine to you—for you *do* what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, *you*,—I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light. . . . You will never more, I hope, talk of 'the honor of my acquaintance', but I will joyfully wait for the delight of your friendship, and the spring, and my Chapel-sight after all!"

Thus was launched the most sublime correspondence between a man and a woman in all literature. The world would have been infinitely the poorer without the tender, noble revelation of these two beautiful souls; without the intellectual wealth of criticism, allusion, comment, poured out with charm, with sanity, with generosity and sparkling humor. The two bulky volumes entitled: *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, 1845-1846* would be a satisfying choice for one's sojourn on a desert island. The precious originals are now a prized possession in the "Treasure Room" at Wellesley College.

LYRIC LOVE

An American poet, William Brunton, sang of the lovers revealed in these letters:

"Devotion such as yours is heavenly-wise,
And yet the possible of earth ye show;
Ye dwellers in the blue of summer skies,
Through you a finer love of love we know;
It is as if the angels moved with men,
And key of Paradise were found again!"

At first the viewpoints of the two poets were markedly different. He was a vigorous man of unusually exuberant vitality, six years her junior, looking eagerly forward to a life's wealth of experiences; she a frail invalid who had said good-bye to activities and decided: "The brightest place in the House of Life is leaning out of the window." His reply to that came ardently: "I pray you not to lean out of the window when my foot is only on the stair."

Soon in the immemorial fashion of her sex she began worrying about his health and imprudences. Robert was incurably sociable and an extraordinarily graceful dancer. He would be out all night at gay parties, and on his return often sit down and write to his Egeria for hours before taking even a nap. She chided him for such imprudences: "So when wise people happen to be ill, they sit up till six o'clock in the morning and get up at nine? Do tell me how many *Lurias* can be made out of such ungodly imprudences. If the wind blows east or west, where can any remedy be when such evil deeds are being committed? . . . We all know that thinking, dreaming, creating people like yourself have two lives to bear instead of one . . . and therefore you should sleep for both." In this letter she wittily refers to the desire he has expressed that sometime they may write a poem together, assuring him: "*I should like it still better. I should like it for some ineffable reasons. And I should not like it a bit the less for the grand supply of jests it would administer to the critical Board of Trade, about visible darkness multiplied by two mounting into palpable obscure. We should not mind, should we?*"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

After the exchange of many letters, fascinating in their self revelation as each opens his soul instinctively to a sympathy golden in its promise, she writes him on May sixteenth that he may come to see her. She begs that he will not speak of it afterward as some who wish to call might feel hurt at her refusal to see them: "Putting the question of health quite aside, it would be unbecoming to lie here on the sofa and make a company-show of an infirmity and hold a beggar's hat for sympathy . . . Come then. There will be truth and simplicity for you in any case; and a friend."

On the envelope of this letter Robert Browning wrote: "Tuesday, May 20, 1845, 3-4½ p.m." Afterward every meeting was recorded in like fashion. Imagination follows him into the shrine on Wimpole Street and to his first vision of the tiny frail figure lying on her sofa, her pale face lighted by great wistful eyes. His friend Mr. William Sharp wrote afterward of that meeting:

"Nor was he whom she loved as a man as well as revered as a poet, unworthy of her. His was the robustest poetical intellect of the century; his, the keenest outlook; his, almost the sole unfaltering footsteps along the perilous ways of speculative thought. A fair life, irradiate with fairer ideals, conserved his native integrity from that incongruity between practice and precept so commonly exemplified. Comely in all respects, with his black-brown wavy hair, finely cut features, ready and winsome smile, alert luminous eyes, quick, spontaneous gestures—an inclination of the head, a lift of the eyebrows, a modulation of the lips, an assertive or deprecatory wave of the hand, conveying so much—and a voice at that time of a singular penetrating sweetness, he was, even without that light of the future upon his forehead which she was so swift to discern, a man to captivate any woman of kindred nature and sympathies. Over and above these advantages, he possessed a rare quality of physical magnetism. By virtue of this he could either attract irresistibly or strongly repel."

Certainly there was no doubt in Robert Browning's heart or mind when he left that upper chamber that afternoon. He

LYRIC LOVE

was so pitiful of her frailty, so fearful concerning his own exuberant vitality and happiness, that he sent a note back immediately, begging her to assure him that he did not speak too loud or stay too long. Even if he did not word the thought, he felt as did his father when first shown the picture of Elizabeth Barrett: "It is a face which makes the worship of the saints seem possible." He had now found his mission in life and never from that moment did he lose faith in his conviction that their two lives were intended to flow in one current through time and eternity.

A week later he wrote the only letter destroyed in the course of their correspondence, apparently an ardent declaration of his love. Whatever Elizabeth Barrett, the "head-long," thought in her secret heart of this precipitancy, her reply expresses only the pain it gives her that he should "speak so wildly," and she tells him he "must *forget at once and forever* having said the things at all" or she "*must not . . . will not see him again.*" However, she confesses that she takes this stand in order to be "a little less unworthy of a generosity from which I recoil by instinct," adding, "If I have said one word to vex you, pity me for having had to say it!"

Browning instinctively knew that as an invalid she felt she had no right to encourage his overtures, so he decided to make haste slowly. He lies a bit awkwardly in his reply, deriding himself for having indulged a poet's tendency to be "high fantastical," and begs her to return the offending letter that he may burn it. She obeys but declares: "It is admitted to be very beautiful and well worthy the rest of its kin in the portfolio . . . And we will shuffle the cards and begin the game again if you please." He answers: "Enter Robert Browning next Wednesday—as boldly as he suspects most peepers do just after they have been soundly frightened."

From then on for a time the letters hide behind a façade of warm intellectual friendship, each trying to prove that the other was the superior in mind and soul! Browning's calls were the bright spot in each week for both of them. He would arrive bringing flowers from his sister's garden and

POMPILIA AND HER POET

sweet cakes for Elizabeth's already much too fat spaniel, Flush,—an attention usually repaid by snaps and snarls. The improvement in her health under the stimulus of happiness began to be marked. She commenced going out of doors, and jestingly declared that her father considered her illness "only obstinacy and dry toast".

August twenty-fifth was the date of the beginning of a change in their relations. In a letter on that day she broke through the reserved restraint of years and poured out her heart to this new sympathetic friend in order that he might understand the extraordinary patriarchal tyranny exercised by her father, whom none the less she dearly loved, and realize why she had never suggested a meeting between the two men. "Never was a truer affection in a father's heart or a heart loyaller and purer. The evil is in his system. He takes it to be his duty to rule like the kings of Christendom by divine right."

For the first time since her life's great tragedy, reluctantly and racked with the pain of living over her agony, she writes about the death of her favorite brother. Her father had grudgingly allowed him to prolong his stay in Torquay when Elizabeth's aunt had written that Elizabeth's very life depended on her having the cheer of her brother's companionship. Rather pitifully in this letter she praises her father because, although he had written to her before the accident that he considered it very wrong in her to exact such a thing as her brother's longer absence from home, yet after the tragedy he never once had said that if it had not been for her "the crown of his house would not have fallen." For months after the accident she lay half conscious, too near to God under the crushing of His hand to pray at all:

" 'What says the body when they spring
Some monstrous torture-engine's whole
Strength on it? No more says the soul.' "

In his answer Browning implies that he has never questioned any necessities imposed on her in the ordering of her home life, and asserts: "I believe in you absolutely, utterly

LYRIC LOVE

... Let me say now—*this once only*—that I loved you from my soul and gave you my life, so much of it as you would take—and all that is *done*, not to be altered now: it was wholly independent of any return on your part."

She replies: "You have followed the most generous of impulses in your whole bearing to me . . . Yet I cannot help adding that yours has not been quite the hardest part . . . Mine has been more difficult—and I have sunk under it again and again . . . the effort to recover the duty of a lost position . . . Could I be justified in abetting the step . . . of your emptying your water gourds into the sand? . . . What could I speak that would not be unjust to you? Your life! if you gave it to me and I put my whole heart into it; what should I put but anxiety, and more sadness than you were born to? What could I give you which it would not be ungenerous to give?"

Some of the poems she wrote about this time bear witness to the struggle taking place in her heart. *Insufficiency* is a beautiful lyric:

"There is no one beside thee and no one above thee;
Thou standest alone as the nightingale sings!
Yet my words that would praise thee are impotent things,
For none can express thee though all should approve thee!
I love thee so, Dear, that I only can love thee.

"Say what can I do for thee? weary thee, grieve thee?
Lean on thy shoulder—new burdens to add?
Weep my tears over thee—making thee sad?
Oh, hold me not—love me not! Let me retrieve thee!
I love thee so, Dear, that I only can leave thee."

All of the early poems in her exquisite sequence, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, reveal this conflict between her heart and judgment:

"And a voice said in mastery while I strove.
'Guess now who holds thee?' 'Death!' I said. But there
The silver answer rang: 'Not Death, but Love.' "

POMPILIA AND HER POET

" What hast *thou* to do
With looking from the lattice-lights at me,
A poor, tired, wandering singer? . . . singing through
The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?"

"Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before,
Without the sense of that which I forbore—
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
And sees within my eyes the tears of two."

Did Elizabeth realize when she confessed to a lover possessing the ardent temperament of Robert Browning that her hesitation was founded purely on the fear of being a burden and anxiety in his future life, that she was then and there and for all time striking her flag?

CONFLUENCE

THEIR letters to each other were by now the day's one event of importance. Sociable Robert would sometimes sit awed and almost silent on the edge of his chair for an hour or two when he called on Elizabeth; then rush home and sit up half the night to tell her the things he had meant to say. He was the greater poet, she by far the better letter writer. He gloried in her grace and charm and chuckled mightily when he read such shrewd comment as: "The curious thing in this world is not its stupidity but the upperhandism of the stupidity. The geese are in the Capitol and the Romans in the farmyard—and it seems quite natural that it should be so, both to geese and Romans!"

She for her part would smile gently as she tried to disentangle his word-torrents, poured out in involved confusion of thought, sentences sometimes thirty lines long! She loved his rugged masculinity, his patient consideration, his stern repression of comment on the unhealthy dominance of her father in their home. We with the assumed sophistication of an added century often smile at the excessive formality of these lovers, their terrors of discovery which might bring Robert's visits to an end, their tremors at asking for a lock of hair or the return of a letter, but the smile is always tender because Robert and Elizabeth knew so gloriously how to laugh at their own absurdities.

Browning was convinced that he should now come out into the open, seek to banish her fears, and press his suit tactfully, gently, but none the less unremittingly. Accordingly he wrote: "From the beginning and at this moment I never dreamed of winning your love . . . nor would I supplant any of the affections that have taken root in you . . . Is it on my account that you bid me leave this subject? . . . I know, if one may know anything, that to make my life yours and increase it by union with yours, would render me supremely

POMPILIA AND HER POET

happy." In his wanting to lay everything at her feet he can think of but one thing which will be really a sacrifice, and in the implication that he wishes to make himself ready to care for her life, he accordingly offers to lay aside his prejudice against making money!

"For my own future way in the world I have always refused to care . . . beyond 'considering the lilies how they grow', but now I see you near this life, all changes, and, at a word, I will do all that ought to be done. I *do* remember that Charles Kean offered to give me five hundred pounds for any play that might suit him—to say nothing of Mr. Colburn saying confidentially that he wanted more than his dinner 'a novel on the subject of *Napoleon*'! So one may make money if one does not live in a house in a row."

Even today no poet expects material prosperity from his own especial wares, and in those Victorian days, as we have seen, poets expected to pay for their own publications. It was about this time that Elizabeth wrote Browning in great surprise and pleasure: "Just as I was enclosing my sixty pounds debt to Mr. Moxon (for publication), I did actually and miraculously receive a remittance of fourteen pounds from the selfsame bookseller of New York who agreed last year to print my poems at his own risk and give me 'ten per cent on the profit'. Not that I ever asked for such a thing! They were the terms offered. And I always considered the 'percentage' as quite visionary—put in for the sake of effect to make the agreement look better! But no—you see! One's poetry has a real 'commercial value' if you do but take it far away enough from the 'civilization of Europe'. When you get near the backwoods and the red Indians, it turns out to be nearly as good as 'cabbages', after all. You remember what you said to me of cabbages *versus* poems in one of the first letters you wrote to me?"

However, in answer to his offer to make money for her sake she assures him that there is no reason "for soiling the heart with worldly thoughts. . . . You cannot despise the gold and gauds of this life more than I do . . . If I *wished* to be very poor in the world's sense of poverty, I *could not*,



ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING, 1859
From a Drawing by Field Talfourd

CONFLUENCE

with three or four hundred pounds a year of which no living will can dispossess me. And is it not the chief good of money, the being free from the need of thinking about it? It seems so to me."

In this same letter she takes another step forward in the matter so vital to his happiness: "Neither now nor formerly has any man been to my feelings what you are . . . and if I were different in some respects and free in others by the providence of God, I would accept trust of your happiness, gladly, proudly, and gratefully; and give away my own life and soul to that end. I *would* do it—*not*, I *do*—observe! It is a truth without a consequence; only meaning that I am not all stone—only proving that I am not likely to help you in wrong against yourself . . . Something worse than even a sense of unworthiness *God* has put between us! and judge yourself if to beat your thoughts against the immovable marble of it can be anything but pain and vexation of spirit to you! The present is here to be seen, speaking for itself! and the best future you can imagine for me, what a precarious thing it must be—a thing for making burdens out of—only not for your carrying, as I have vowed to my own soul. As dear Mr. Kenyon said today in his smiling kindness—"In ten years you may be strong perhaps' or 'almost strong'!—that being the encouragement of my best friends! What would he say, do you think, if he could know or guess!—what *could* he say but that you were—a poet!—and I—still worse! *Never* let him know or guess! . . . The subject will not bear consideration—it breaks in our hands. But that God is stronger than we, cannot be a bitter thought to you but a holy thought—while He lets me, as much as I can be anyone's, be only yours."

He replies that he must wait till no obstacle exists for her as none exists for him, and shortly afterward he tells her that when he first saw her, he believed she had an irremediable spinal injury, so that she could never walk, yet, being sure that his happiness lay in her hands, he wrote without thought that her physical condition could be an obstacle to his life's devotion. "I desire in this life to live and write out

CONFLUENCE

certain things which are in me and so save my soul. I would endeavor to do this if I were forced to 'live among the lions' . . . but I should do this best if I lived quietly with myself and you. That you cannot dance like Cerito does not materially disarrange this plan—nor that I might (beside the perpetual incentive and sustainment and consolation) get, over and above the main reward, the incidental, peculiar and particular happiness of being allowed when not working to occupy myself with watching you rather than with other pursuits I might otherwise be addicted to—this does not constitute an obstacle as I see obstacles."

At this time her friends and family had been urging that Elizabeth go with a sister and a brother to Pisa to escape the hard winter and foster her improvement in health. Her father bitterly opposed the plan. When she gathered courage to speak to him herself, he was in high dudgeon and told her she could do what she liked; for his part he washed his hands of her altogether. In great sorrow she asked Browning's advice, and in his answer he rather "breaks loose," as might be expected of a man of his integrity and sense of fair play.

"You have said to me more than once that you wished I might never know certain feelings you have been forced to endure, and I wish truly *you* may never feel what I have had to bear in looking on, quite powerless and silent while you are subjected to this treatment which I refuse to characterize—so blind is it *for* blindness." He counsels her to reason the matter out in view of her entire future rather than to adopt blindly her father's pleasure, and die under it. He personally regards submission to such blind tyranny as "the veriest slavery—and I who *could* free you from it, I am here scarcely daring to write. I would marry you . . . come when you let me and go when you bade me . . . I would be no more than one of your brothers. I deliberately choose the realization of that dream (of sitting simply by you for an hour every day) rather than any other, excluding you, I am able to form in this world or any world I know."

Next day she sees him but cannot refer to this letter—her heart is too full. But after he has gone she writes him, thus

CONFLUENCE

taking on September twenty-seventh the step she had believed impossible a month before:

"Your words in this letter seem to me . . . a full and abundant amends for the merely personal sufferings of my whole life. I looked around for the small bitternesses which for several days had been bitter to me, and I could not find one of them. The tear-marks went away in the moisture of new, happy tears. Why, how else could I have felt? How would any woman have felt—who could feel at all—hearing such words said by such a speaker?

"And now listen to me in turn. You have touched me more profoundly than I thought even *you* could have touched me—my heart was full when you came here today. Henceforward I am yours for everything but to do you harm—and I am yours too much to consent to do you harm that way. . . . Perhaps this may be all I ever *shall* be able to say . . . A promise goes to you that none, except God and your will, shall interpose between you and me. If He shall free me within a moderate time from the trailing chain of this weakness, I will then be to you whatever at that hour you shall choose—whether friend or more than friend. So it rests with God and you."

She speaks also in this letter of a boon which she wishes to ask when she can gather sufficient courage. This she does not do until the sixth of November. Meanwhile they have been drawn much nearer together by Mr. Moulton-Barrett's definite refusal to allow her to seek a milder climate. With her acumen she realizes that she has believed her father has loved her "more than he obviously does, but I never would *unknow* anything . . . even if it were the taste of the apples by the Dead Sea, and this must be accepted like the rest. . . . You may be quite sure that I shall be well this winter . . . and I will not be beaten down if the will can do anything. . . . It is only gratitude to you to say it is different now. My cage is not worse but better since you brought the green groundsel to it. . . . We shall see and God shall oversee." And the boon, when she finally has acquired the courage to speak, is: "May I have my letter back . . . the letter I

POMPILIA AND HER POET

was made to return? Do I ask humbly enough? And send it at once, if undestroyed!"

He answers: "Could you believe that untoward letter lived one *moment* after it was returned to me? I burned it and cried, 'serve it right!' " Sorrowfully she replies, "Serves *me* right!" Elizabeth Barrett had already travelled that far! She confesses, "When I wrote that letter to let you come the first time, do you know, the tears ran down my cheeks. I could not tell why. . . . Dramatic poet though you are, you cannot know what my life meant before you touched it—my angel at the gate of the prison."

One is in despair at the hopeless task of giving any just idea of the riches of these marvellous letters in a few chosen quotations. There are increasingly ardent expressions of their love, such as this from her: "'As the doves fly to the windows,' so I think of you! As the prisoners think of liberty, as the dying think of Heaven, so I think of you! When I look up straight to God—nothing, no one, used to intercept me—now there is *you*—only you under Him!" Or he writes: "I am round you—my whole life is wound up and down and over you. . . . I feel you stir everywhere. I am not conscious of thinking or feeling but about you. So will I live, so may I die!"

Naturally, however, the larger part of the eleven hundred pages of the correspondence is given over to shrewd, delightful comments on this author, or that poem or human being, so that they are a reasonably complete record of the thought of the day as reflected in the minds of two gifted souls. Most helpfully they criticise each other's poems. She delicately urges him not to be too impatient or too disdainful to make his meaning clearer, or too proud to teach such persons as desire to be taught. In one letter she says: "If the secrets of daily lives and inner souls may instruct other surviving souls, let them be open to men hereafter as they are to God now. Dust to dust—and soul secrets to humanity—there are natural heirs to all these things." These words and the fact that, while Robert Browning destroyed all the rest of his correspondence, he said shortly before his death

CONFLUENCE

to his son, "There they are, do with them what you please when I am dead and gone!" in reference to these carefully treasured letters—gave Mr. Robert Barrett Browning the conviction that such wealth did indeed belong to humanity.

During the summer of 1846 Browning won his point that she must not spend another winter in the treacherous climate of England and they began to plan for marriage in the autumn. He tried to induce Elizabeth to make a will leaving her property to her family, and at first said his self respect would not allow him to profit by it in any way. She said that nothing would induce her to will her money away from him, but she drew up a document saying that it was to be left to her sisters after *his* death, and he had to be content with that. Other practical matters were discussed—for they did not always remain in the clouds!—should they take books with them to Italy, how many bags and boxes, how should everything be done? Finally Mr. Moulton-Barrett slipped the last cog by ordering an exodus from the house in order that it might be renovated. It would be much easier for Elizabeth to make the break from London, and Browning decided that they must be married at once. She replied, "I have one will which is yours."

She wrote later to a friend regarding these days: "I hate and loathe everything which is clandestine—we both do, Robert and I, but this was the only possible way. My father would have forbidden the house without a moment's scruple, and I should have been incapacitated from any after exertion by the horrible scenes to which, as a thing of course, I should have been exposed. I cannot bear some words. In my actual state of physical weakness, it would have been the sacrifice of my whole life—of my convictions, of my affections, and above all, of what the person dearest to me persisted in calling 'his life and the good of it'—if I had observed that 'form'. Therefore I determined not to observe it, and I consider that in not doing so I sinned against no duty. That I was *constrained* to act clandestinely and did not *choose* to do so, God is my witness. Also, up to the very last we stood in the light of day for the whole world to

POMPILIA AND HER POET

judge us. I never saw him out of the Wimpole Street house. He came twice a week to see me, openly and in the sight of all."

In another letter, she explains her act, then adds: "I tell you so much that you may see the manner of man I had to do with, and the sort of attachment which for nearly two years has been drawing and winning me. I know better than any in the world, indeed, what Mr. Kenyon once said before me, that 'Robert Browning is great in everything.' Now may I not tell you that his genius and all but miraculous attainments, are the least things in him, the moral nature being the very noblest, as all who ever knew him admit."

On September tenth when Mr. Moulton-Barrett decreed that his family might depart for the shore on the following Monday, the lovers decided that Saturday the twelfth should be the day of their marriage. One feels almost on one's knees as one approaches the day, knowing well that was how Robert and Elizabeth felt. After a sleepless night, bravely,—even heroically when we consider her shattered nerves, her cloistered life, her affection for her father—Elizabeth Barrett with the simplicity of the truly great left her home on trembling feet and drove with her faithful maid, Wilson, to Saint Pancras Church, Marylebone. Robert Browning was waiting at the portal. It was the ninety-first of their meetings and Elizabeth Browning stepped out from the shadows of the church into the light of a new life.

EPITHALAMIUM

THE departure to the shore was fortunately postponed by Mr. Moulton-Barrett for another week and this gave Elizabeth time to rest from excitement and make further preparations for the crucial step she was about to take. Because it seemed safer, wiser, it was agreed that husband and wife should not meet during that time. Eighteen letters flew back and forth between them. She had hardly left him before he wrote on their marriage day:

"I look back, and in every one point, every word and gesture, every letter, every *silence*—you have been entirely perfect to me. I would not change one word, one look. You have given me the highest, completest proof of love that ever one human being gave another. I am all gratitude—and all pride that my life has been crowned by you." As one reads the unusually short sentences of this letter, one feels that his emotion is so profound that he is almost struck dumb, deprived of spontaneity by the very excess of his joy in the stupendous thing that has just happened.

At half past four that afternoon she writes him an account of her day. She has kept the secret from her family in order that the wrath of her father may descend on her alone. She admits that it all seems like a dream, and ends: "If either of us two is to suffer injury and sorrow for what happened today—I pray that it may all fall on *me!* Nor should I suffer the most *that* way, as I know, and God knows."

Next day she adds: "What could be better than lifting me from the ground and carrying me into life and the sunshine? I was yours rather by right than by gift. All that I am I owe you—if I enjoy anything now and henceforth, it is through you. Dearest, in the emotion and confusion of yesterday morning, there was yet room in me for one thought that was not a feeling—for I thought that of the many, many women who have stood where I

POMPILIA AND HER POET

stood, and to the same end, not one of them all, perhaps, since that building was a church has had reasons as strong as mine for an absolute trust and devotion toward the man she married—not one! And then I both thought and felt that it was only just for them—those women who were less happy—to have that affectionate sympathy and support and presence of their nearest relations, parent or sister, which failed to me—needing it less through being happier!”

In this same letter after telling him jestingly of some of the embarrassments she had experienced, especially from questions asked by Mr. Kenyon, “looking as if his eyes reached to the rim of his spectacles all the way round,” she says: “I sit in a dream when left to myself. I cannot believe or understand. . . . I feel so happy and exulting to belong to you, past every opposition, out of sight of every will of man—none can put us asunder. . . . I have a right now openly to love you and to hear other people calling it a duty, when I do—knowing that if it were a sin it would be done equally.”

He assures her that he will make every necessary sacrifice, humble himself in every way, if by so doing he may help avert the consequences of her act in her own home.

Mr. Moulton-Barrett finally decreed that the family exodus must take place on Monday the twenty-first. That precipitated hurried planning about luggage, marriage announcements, time-tables, and various mundane things. Finally on Friday night, the eighteenth, Elizabeth wrote the last letter she was ever to write to Robert Browning, since from that time on they were never separated. She agrees to meeting him with her maid the next day to entrain at Vauxhall station for the Southampton packet to Havre:

“I will not write more—I *cannot*. By tomorrow at this time I shall have *you* only to love me, my beloved! You *only*! As if one said *God only*. And we shall have *Him* beside, I pray of Him. . . . The boxes are safely sent. Wilson has been perfect to me. And I—calling her timid and afraid of her timidity! I begin to think that none are so bold as the timid when they are fairly roused.”

EPITHALAMIUM

In 1846 the journey between the two capitals was a long drawn out, fatiguing ordeal, even for the husky, and Elizabeth arrived in Paris worn out with excitement and illness, but sustained by the tonic of happiness and such loving care for her well-being as she had never before known: "Whether in the body or out of it I can scarcely tell." Their close friend, Mrs. Jameson, the noted art critic, was amazed to receive a message from Browning that he was there "with his wife," and to realize that the wife could be none other than the invalid, Elizabeth Barrett. She at once insisted on their joining her at her pension. In a letter to a friend she comments delightfully on the marriage:

"I have also here a poet and a poetess—two celebrities who have run away and married under circumstances peculiarly interesting, and such as render imprudence the height of prudence. Both excellent; but God help them! for I know not how the two poet heads and poet hearts will get on through this prosaic world."

When Wordsworth heard the startling news, he remarked:

"So Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett have gone off together! It is to be hoped they can understand each other, for no one else can."

Their dear Mr. Kenyon wrote the Brownings that he considered them "justified to the uttermost," and to her added that his reaction on receipt of the news had been that even if she had imperiled her life by the undertaking, she still would have been wise to make the venture.

A little later a friend, Joseph Arnould, wrote to Alfred Domett, "*Waring*" who had not yet returned from New Zealand, his rather amusing reaction:

"She is, you know, our present greatest living English poetess. She has been in the most absolute and enforced seclusion from society; cultivating her mind to a wonderful amount of accomplishment, instructing herself in all languages, reading Chrysostom in the original Greek, and publishing the best metrical translation that has yet appeared of the 'Prometheus Bound'; having also found time

POMPILIA AND HER POET

to write three volumes of poetry, the last of which raised her name second in place only to that of Browning and Tennyson. Well, this lady, so gifted, so secluded, so tyrannized over, fell in love with Browning in the spirit before ever she saw him in the flesh. Imagine, you who know him, the effect which his graceful bearing, high demeanor, and noble speech must have had on such a mind when first she saw the man of her visions in the twilight of her darkened room. She was at once in love as a poet-soul only can be; and Browning, as by contagion or electricity, was no less from the first interview wholly in love with her. He is a glorious fellow! Oh, I forgot to say that the *soi-disante* invalid, once emancipated from the paternal despotism, has had a wondrous revival, or rather a complete metamorphosis; walks, rides, eats, and drinks like a young and healthy woman. But one word covers all; they are in Love, who lends his own youth to everything."

Mr. Moulton-Barrett never forgave his daughter. To cloak his outraged vanity he invented this reason: "She should have been thinking of another world!" Nor, indeed, did he later forgive her sister and brother who took their courage in both hands and followed her example in exchanging the petty despotism of the parental home for matrimony. Until her death this grim relentlessness was a profound grief to Elizabeth. Her letters were all returned unopened; he refused to see her on her visits to England, but her own affection never wavered. The dedication of the complete edition of her poems to him late in her life is very touching because it is instinct with the hope that even then he might relent, but the "unco guid" almost never show regret or suggest that there might be a flaw in their invincible consciousness of rectitude!

The Brownings travelled by carriage in leisurely fashion through France and Italy and arrived in Pisa early in October. Italy enthusiastically received them to her heart for the greater part of the fifteen years of their married life. Their six months' honeymoon in the sleepy old city was spent "in reading and writing and talking of all things in

EPITHALAMIUM

heaven and earth, and a little beside." Browning took over the household duties and the sustenance of these two poets certainly sounds ambrosial! Dinner at two was often thrushes and chianti, supper at six coffee and milk rolls, and at nine they usually had roasted chestnuts and grapes. Never a debt vexed their souls. "Robert would not sleep if an unpaid bill dragged itself into another week."

With the enfranchisement from gloom into a régime of outdoor living and under the alchemy of perfect happiness, Elizabeth's spirit soared like a lark in the first spring wind, and before long Browning wrote home that she was "fat and rosy." Her own testimony concerning the first months of their married happiness is most emphatic:

"Robert and I are deep in the fourth month of wedlock, and there has not been a shadow between, nor a *word* (and I have observed that all married people confess to *words*)."

As time passes she goes on writing of the happiness of their "perpetual tête-à-tête" as if she never could get over the wonder that they escaped the usual dangers that are prophesied in the case of such close living:

"I must say to you who saw the beginning with us that this end of fifteen months is just fifteen times better and brighter; the only differences which have touched me bring more and more happiness."

After five years she writes:

"So far from regretting my marriage, it has made the happiness and honor of my life, and every unkindness received from my own makes me press nearer to the tenderest and noblest of human hearts *proved* by the uninterrupted devotion of nearly five years. Husband, lover, nurse—not one of these has Robert been to me, but all three together. I neither regret my marriage, therefore, nor the manner of it, because the manner was a necessity of the act."

In April the Brownings moved to Florence and a little later settled in Palazzo Guidi, little realizing that the fact of their making this old palace their home for the greater part of fifteen years would raise it to the dignity of a famous literary shrine. Naturally, this immortality was enhanced

POMPILIA AND HER POET

by the title chosen for one of Mrs. Browning's best poems, *Casa Guidi Windows*. After the first five years they spent several summers in France and England and occasionally wintered in Rome, but "home" was to them Casa Guidi. As both had the social instinct in high degree and a veritable genius for friendship where the intellectual aristocracy was concerned, with the restoration of Elizabeth's health they kept more or less open house. She once wrote to a friend: "We have a spare bedroom which opens of itself at the thought of you."

Wherever they were, the cream of the literary and artistic world of France, Italy, England, and especially America, sought them out and wrote enthusiastically about them as human beings. A list of their friends was a veritable "Who's Who" of the mid-century. Lockhart, the biographer of Sir Walter Scott, declared his keen appreciation: "Browning isn't at all like a damned literary man!" Americans who recorded their impressions of the Brownings and their home include Bayard Taylor, Richard Henry Stoddard, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Stillman Hillard, and William Wetmore Story. Mr. Story, with his vision of an artist, has given a vivid picture of Casa Guidi:

"They who have known Casa Guidi can never forget the square anteroom with its great picture and pianoforte—the little dining-room covered with tapestry where hung medallions of Tennyson, Carlyle, and Robert Browning—the long room filled with plaster casts and studies, which was Mrs. Browning's retreat—and, dearest of all, the large drawing-room where *she* always sat. It opens upon a balcony filled with plants, and looks out upon the iron grey church of Santa Felice. There was something about this room which seemed to make it a proper and especial haunt for poets. The dark shadows and subdued light gave it a dreary look, which was enhanced by the tapestry covered walls, and the old pictures of saints that looked out sadly from their carved frames of black wood. Large bookcases constructed of specimens of Florentine carving selected by Mr. Browning were brimming over with wise-looking books. Tables were cov-

EPITHALAMIUM

ered with more gaily bound volumes, the gifts of brother authors. Dante's grave profile, a cast of Keats's face and brow taken after death, a pen and ink sketch of Tennyson, the genial face of John Kenyon, little paintings of the boy Browning, all attracted the eye and gave rise to a thousand musings. A quaint mirror, easy chairs and sofas, and a hundred nothings which always add an indescribable charm, were massed in this room. But the glory of all and that which sanctified all, was seated in a low arm chair near the door. A small table, strewn with writing materials, books and newspapers was always by her side."

Mr. Hillard waxes lyrical in his account of their home and of Mrs. Browning in particular: "Her tremulous voice flutters over her words like the flame of a dying candle over the wick." His most beautiful image of her is unforgettable: "She is a soul of fire enclosed in a shell of pearl."

The crown was set on their happiness in March, 1849, when their son, christened Robert Wiedemann Barrett, arrived on the scene. He was a healthy, vivacious youngster, and his father and mother in Mrs. Browning's own words, "caught up their parental pleasures with a sort of passion". For the most part the child, called Pen or Penini, was always the close companion of his parents, and became popular with all their friends. His mother took a new lease of life, and rode donkeys, climbed mountains, wandered through forests or churches or art galleries in the companionship of her husband and son; in fact, did all the normal things to which the invalid of Wimpole Street had said eternal farewell.

It was shortly after Pen's birth when they were at Bagni di Lucca that his wife gave Browning one of the proudly great moments of his life. Before their marriage she had written him that she had something to show him in Pisa which she could not show him then. However some chance remark of his there which she sensitively misunderstood, made her still shy concerning her great gift. Finally here at the baths she felt the hour had come to break through her reserve.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

After breakfast one morning she went upstairs, leaving her husband looking idly out of the window while the servant cleared the table where he expected to work. After the servant had left, soft footsteps sounded behind him and his wife's hand on his shoulder kept him from turning so he could see her face. She slipped a manuscript into his pocket, saying:

"Please read that and if you don't like it, tear it up!" Then she fled back upstairs while Robert Browning sat down to read the noblest love sequence ever written by a woman to the man of her choice.

As we read the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and trace her fight against harming his life by accepting his summons back from the death to which she regarded herself as dedicated, we can imagine the reverential ecstasy of her lover, dowered suddenly with this priceless gift. Could there have been a more beautiful moment in their flawless union than the one which followed his ascent of the stairway to her side? These sonnets throb with ardent humility, with touching rapture up to their climax in that incomparable one in which she attempts to reduce the inexpressible to words—and succeeds as only the greatest of poets have ever succeeded:

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise;
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith;
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death."

MEASURELESS CONTENT

EVEN these two poets with their exceptional capacity for winging into the Empyrean would probably have found winging á deux and life together on the heights a bit difficult had each not been well equipped with that excellent ballast, a sense of humor. Mrs. Browning's letters especially abound in gay whimsicalities concerning their life together. Once "Robert in a fit of suicidal impatience" anticipated the non-hirsute mode of today and shaved off all facial adornment. When he presented himself before his wife for approval, she was so shocked at the result that she wept! When she had sufficiently recovered for reasonable speech, she pronounced the desecration "high crime and misdemeanor," and said that everything was at an end between them if he didn't let it grow out again immediately. "It grew out white, which was a just punishment of the gods—our sins leave their traces. However, the Argentine touch gives a character of elevation and thought to his physiognomy!"

Perhaps it was Robert's early experiences with hurt cats and birds which gave the impetus, but he really loved to play the nurse. She writes: "When I am *so* good as to let myself be carried upstairs, and *so* angelical as to sit still on the sofa, and *so* considerate, moreover, as *not* to put my foot into a puddle, why, *my* duty is considered done to a perfection which is worthy of all adoration."

Robert really had almost a mania for carrying his tiny wife about in his arms, perhaps in part from a desire to display his masculine strength. This vanity, however, yielded to a greater: "If he is vain about anything in the world, it is about my improved health, and I used to say to him, 'But you needn't talk so much to people about how your wife walked here with you and there with you as if a wife with a pair of feet was a miracle of nature.'"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

She gloried in his robustness and understood its dangers: "Robert has an enormous superfluity of vital energy, and if it isn't employed, it sticks its fangs into him. He gets out of spirits. Nobody understands exactly why—except me, who am in the inside of him and hear him breathe."

When, having already satisfied his cravings for music by becoming a really skillful pianist, he satisfied his cravings for art and made some entirely creditable busts under the instruction of his American friend Story, she exclaimed:

"Nothing but clay does he care for, poor lost soul!"

Gleefully she wrote his sister, Sarianna:

"The women adore him everywhere far too much for decency!"

Her comment after visiting George Sand in Paris shows remarkable breadth of spirit in a Victorian:

"She has great nicety and refinement in her personal ways, I think, and the cigarette is really a feminine weapon if properly understood."

From Paris also in 1858 she writes: "I will tell you the result of having investigated the bonnet question generally. I was told at a fashionable shop that hats might be worn out of the teens, but in Paris you see them only on the heads of small girls."

Paris she named her "weakness", Italy her "passion", while Florence was "a chimney corner where I can sulk and be happy".

Her soul shrank from the thought of "the rust of age which is the thickening of the mortal mask between souls. Why talk of age when we are all young in soul and heart? Be sure that it's highly moral to be young as long as possible. Women who dress 'suitably to their years' (that is, as hideously as possible) are a disgrace to their sex, aren't they now?"

In nothing was the ideal relationship of the Brownings revealed more convincingly than in the attitude of each toward the other's work. Their motto was, "Hands off except for help!" Each worked separately, then submitted finished poems to the other for criticism. This large generosity of

MEASURELESS CONTENT

understanding made for betterment in the output of both, just as inevitably as did the happiness resulting from the welding together of their two personalities and lives. Her spiritually buoyant vitality equalled his which was both physical and spiritual. He was, of course, essentially dramatic; she inherently lyric. Each enhanced and strengthened his own special brand of afflatus in the other. She needed to be touched by his ruggedness in order to sound the full throated notes of *Casa Guidi Windows*, *De Profundis*, *Parting Lovers*, *Mother and Poet*. Never could he have sunk his robustness into the luminous simplicity and delicacy of Pompilia's soul of pure fire, except by grace of absorption from her whose lark-songs mounted in unison with his trumpet tones!

In *De Profundis* she voices Browning's own deep-rooted optimism, especially in her concluding stanzas:

"For us—whatever's undergone,
Thou knowest, willest what is done.
Grief may be joy misunderstood:
Only the Good discerns the good.
I trust Thee while my days go on.

"Whatever's lost, it first was won!
We will not struggle nor impugn.
Perhaps the cup was broken here
That Heaven's new wine might show more clear.
I praise Thee while my days go on.

"I praise Thee while my days go on,
I love Thee while my days go on!
Through dark and dearth, through fire and frost,
With emptied arms and treasure lost
I thank Thee while my days go on!

"And having in Thy life-depth thrown
Being and suffering (which are one),
As a child drops some pebble small
Down some deep well and hears it fall
Smiling—so I! THY DAYS GO ON!"

MEASURELESS CONTENT

A Musical Instrument, perhaps her most perfect poem, is such a joyous example of pure lyricism that it must be quoted in its entirety:

"What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and padding with hoofs of a goat,
And breaking the golden lilies afloat
With the dragon-fly on the river?

"He tore out a reed, the great god Pan,
From the deep cool bed of the river.
The limpid water turbidly ran,
And the broken lilies a-dying lay,
And the dragon-fly had fled away,
Ere he brought it out of the river.

"High on the shore sate the great god Pan,
While turbidly flowed the river,
And hacked and hewed as a great god can
With his hard bleak steel at the patient reed,
Till there was not a sign of a leaf indeed
To prove it fresh from the river.

"He cut it short, did the great god Pan,
(How tall it stood in the river!)
Then drew the pith like the heart of a man,
Steadily from the outside ring,
Then notched the poor dry empty thing
In holes as he sate by the river.

" 'This is the way,' laughed the great god Pan,
(Laughed while he sate by the river!)
'The only way since the gods began
To make sweet music, they could succeed.'
Then dropping his mouth to a hole in the reed,
He blew in power by the river.

"Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan,
Piercing sweet by the river!
Blinding sweet, O great god Pan!
The sun on the hill forgot to die,
And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly
Came back to dream on the river.

MEASURELESS CONTENT

"Yet half a beast is the great god Pan
To laugh, as he sits by the river,
Making a poet out of a man.
The true gods sigh for the cost and the pain—
For the reed that grows nevermore again
As a reed with the reeds of the river."

Far more earnest in devoting heart and pen to "causes" than was her husband, Elizabeth Browning threw tremendous enthusiasm into the Italian struggles to throw off the yoke of the Austrian conqueror, and out of this passion for freedom grew some of her noblest poems. Perhaps the one of greatest dramatic power is *Mother and Poet*, written shortly before she died.

"Dead! one of them shot by the sea in the east,
And one of them shot in the west by the sea.
Dead! both of my boys! When you sit at the feast
And are wanting a great song for Italy free,
Let none look at *me!*

"Yet I was a poetess only last year,
And good at my art for a woman, men said.
But *this* woman, *this*, who is agonized here,
The east sea and west sea rhyme on in her head
Forever instead.

.....
"To teach them—It stings there. *I* made them indeed
Speak plain the word 'country.' I taught them, no doubt,
That a country's a thing men should die for at need.
I prated of liberty, rights, and about
The tyrant turned out.

"And when their eyes flashed, O their beautiful eyes!
I exulted! nay, let them go forth at the wheels
Of the guns, and denied not. But then the surprise,
When one sits quite alone! Then one weeps, then one kneels!
God! how the house feels!

.....
"O Christ of the seven wounds, who look'dst through the dark
To the face of Thy mother! consider, I pray,
How we common mothers stand desolate, mark
Whose sons, not being Christs, die with eyes turned away,
And no last word to say!"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

One must not quote all of the twenty stanzas, but turn to that earlier poem which won for her enthusiastic acclaim and the adoration of her adopted country. The first part of *Casa Guidi Windows* was written before Pen was born, written in hope and faith in the sincerity of the Italian political leaders; the second part, written three years later, is sad with "the discrepancy between aspiration and performance, between faith and disillusion, between hope and fact." She was incapable of the rôle of disinterested spectator, and had taken the cause of an enfranchised Italy to her heart. The poem is very noble and in some respects her highest flight. It is impossible to quote more than a few stanzas. It begins:

"I heard last night a little child go singing
 'Neath Casa Guidi windows by the church,
'*O bella liberta, O bella!*' stringing
 The same words still on notes he went in search
So high for, you concluded the upspringing
 Of such a nimble bird to sky from perch
Must leave the whole bush in a tremble green;
 And that the heart of Italy must beat
While such a voice had leave to rise serene
 'Twixt church and palace of a Florence street!
A little child, too, who not long had been
 By mother's finger steadied on his feet;
And still *O bella liberta* he sang."

The beginning of Part Second strikes a saddened note:

"I wrote a meditation and a dream,
 Hearing a little child sing in the street.
I leant upon his music as a theme,
 Till it gave way beneath my heart's full beat,
Which tried at an exultant prophecy
 But dropped before the measure was complete—
Alas for songs and hearts! O Tuscany,
 O Dante's Florence, is the type too plain?
Didst thou too only sing of liberty
 As little children take up a high strain
With unintentioned voices, and break off
 To sleep upon their mothers' knees again?"

MEASURELESS CONTENT

Could'st thou not watch one hour? Then sleep enough—
That sleep may hasten manhood, and sustain
The faint pale spirit with some muscular stuff."

Near the end of the long poem she apostrophizes her small son:

"The sun strikes through the windows, up the floor:
Stand out in it, my own young Florentine,
Not two years old, and let me see thee more!
It grows along thy amber curls to shine
Brighter than elsewhere. Now look straight before
And fix thy brave blue English eyes on mine,
And from thy soul, which fronts the future so
With unabashed and unabated gaze,
Teach me to hope for what the Angels know
When they smile clear as thou dost. Down God's ways,
With just alighted feet between the snow
And snowdrops, where a little lamb may gaze,
Thou hast no fear, my lamb, about the road,
Albeit in our vain-glory we assume
That less than we have, thou hast learnt of God."

Long before her marriage, Elizabeth had conceived a desire to write a "novel-poem" and this desire found expression in a poem which is in very truth as long as many novels of today. *Aurora Leigh* was published in 1856 and instantly caught the public favor so a second edition was demanded within a fortnight. The author wrote on hearing this, "That golden-hearted Robert is in ecstasies about it—far more than if it all related to a book of his own." While to us of today the narrative is stilted, quaint, at times even fantastic, it is in large measure a fine spiritual biography of a richly endowed soul, and teems with the intellectual and spiritual wealth of her philosophy of life.

During these fifteen years of measureless content alternating with exultant happiness, Robert Browning seems to have lived for the sake of making his wife's song flight easier and more sustained, while he allowed his own genius to lie relatively dormant. The fruit of their discussions on the subject of religion he did embody in two poems which

POMPILIA AND HER POET

were published in 1850—*Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day*.
Mrs. Browning's faith was one of calm serenity,—

"Oh, the little birds sang east, and the little birds
sang west,
And I smiled to think God's greatness flowed around
our incompleteness,
Round our restlessness, His rest."

Browning's ideal of religion, on the contrary, was one of
love in action, of responsibility and strife:

"For the loving worm within its clod
Were diviner than a loveless God."

"..... God, whose pleasure brought
Man into being, stands away
As it were a hand-breadth off, to give
Room for the newly-made to live
And use his gifts of brain and heart."

"..... I count life just a stuff
To try the soul's strength on, educe the man."

These two longer poems were followed in 1855 by a
superb collection of fifty dramatic lyrics which he named
Men and Women. One is staggered at the thought of trying
to give any idea of their richness by inadequate quotation.
There are poems of rollicking lilt, like *A Grammarian's
Funeral* and *Up in a Villa*. *In a Balcony* is one of his finest
dramatic poems, cast for three characters. For poems deal-
ing with art, we have the ironic *Fra Lippo Lippi* and the
tragic *Andrea del Sarto*, the artist who realized:

"I do what many dream of all their lives,
Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing
Their works drop, I know, groundward, but themselves,
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me
Ah, but a mans' reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?"

MEASURELESS CONTENT

Madly infatuated with his soulless wife who strips him of gold to enrich her lover, he yet retains clarity of vision:

"But had you—oh, with that same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes and more than perfect mouth,
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare—
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged,
'God and the glory! Never care for gain!
The present by the future, what is that?
Live for fame, side by side with Angelo!
Raphael is waiting: up to God, all three!
I might have done it for you. So it seems:
Perhaps not. All is as God overrules
And thus we half-men struggle."

The Guardian Angel celebrates Guercino's painting and the poem triumphantly epitomizes Browning's philosophy of living:

"O world, as God has made it! All is beauty:
And knowing this is love, and love is duty.
What further may be sought for or declared?"

Music is celebrated in *Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha* and *A Toccato of Galuppi's*; heroism in those splendid poems which acclaim spiritual triumph in the midst of bodily defeat, *A Patriot* and *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. In this collection, too, his earlier fragment, *Saul*, is rounded out into a superb poem. Saul, the first great king of Israel, is afflicted with blue demons and they send for the golden-haired shepherd lad, David, to come and play on his harp in the hope that music will set the king's spirit free. As we read Browning's marvellous poetic embodiment of the soul of the music played by the lad, we are almost ready to proclaim *Saul* his highest achievement. Step by step the music progresses, throbbing with all that allures in nature, in the life of humanity, until at last a flash of eternal truth forced the lad to lay down his harp, "confounded at Wisdom laid bare":

POMPELIA AND HER POET

"Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man?
And dare doubt He alone shall not help him who yet
alone can?
. Oh, speak through me now!
Would I suffer for him that I love! So would'st thou—
so wilt thou!
As Thy Love is discovered almighty, almighty be proved
Thy power, that exists with and for it, of being Beloved!
He who did most, shall bear most; the strongest shall
stand the most weak.
'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for! my flesh that
I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by forever: a Hand like
this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the
Christ stand!"

In masterly comprehension the concluding stanza eases the lad down from the ecstatic Mount of Vision to the tender, gentle things of nature once more, bringing with him none the less, as the poet well knew he must, the trailing glory of his Pisgah-sight.

In line with this poem is *An Epistle*. Karshish, an Arabian physician,—

" the picker-up of learning's crumbs,
The not-incurious in God's handiwork
(This man's-flesh He hath admirably made,
Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,
To coop up and keep down on earth a space
That puff of vapor from His mouth, man's soul)"

writes to his friend and fellow physician of a curious experience he has just had. He isn't sure that it is important enough to interest Adib. Undoubtedly it is a mere case of mania, but in the little town of Bethany he has run across a man by the name of Lazarus who seems really to believe that he was dead for three days and then brought back to life by a Nazarene physician of his tribe. He is unable to

MEASURELESS CONTENT

seek out and question this Nazarene because he perished in a tumult at the time of the earthquake. Of course, Lazarus was stark mad because he believed that the man who healed him was none other than God who took on human flesh and came to live on earth a while. He hopes his friend will pardon him for writing at length about the experience—then suddenly breaks out:

"The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So the All-Great were the All-Loving too—
So through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, 'O heart I made, a Heart beats here!
Face my Hands fashioned, see it in Myself!
Thou hast no power, nor mayst conceive of Mine,
But love I gave thee, with Myself to love,
And thou must love Me, who have died for thee!
The madman saith He said so: it is strange."

No longer does Browning's love poetry seem the work of a philosophizing spectator. In *Men and Women* he is the lover and the woman interest is infused into a large number of the fifty poems. There are graceful lyrics, like *One Way of Love*:

"All June I bound the rose in sheaves.
Now rose by rose I strip the leaves
And strew them where Pauline may pass.
She will not turn aside? Alas!
Let them lie. Suppose they die?
The chance was they might take her eye.

"How many a month I strove to suit
These stubborn fingers to the lute!
Today I venture all I know.
She will not hear my music? So!
Break the string; fold music's wing:
Suppose Pauline had bade me sing!

"My whole life long I learned to love.
This hour my utmost art I prove
And speak my passion—heaven or hell?
She will not give me heaven? 'Tis well!
Lose who may—I still can say,
Those who win heaven, blest are they!"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Of the same perfect lyric quality is the little poem, *My Star*, the only one he could ever remember when asked for an autograph:

“All that I know
Of a certain star
Is, it can throw
(Like the angled spar)
Now a dart of red,
Now a dart of blue;
Till my friends have said
They would fain see too,
My star that dartles the red and the blue!
Then it stops like a bird, like a flower hangs furred:
They must solace themselves with the Saturn above it.
What matter to me if their star is a world?
Mine has opened its soul to me; therefore I love it.”

This has always been held to refer to Mrs. Browning. Unquestionably *Two in the Campagna* celebrates their excursion to that noted outskirt of Rome. *Any Wife to Any Husband* and *The Last Ride Together* are interesting poems dealing with imaginary situations, as is also the longer poem, *The Statue and the Bust*.

Here are riches enough, surely, for any collection, but imbedded in their midst is that heart of pure gold, *By the Fireside*, from which we have already quoted. Browning plans for life's November:

“I shall be found by the fire, I suppose,
O'er a great wise book as beseemeth age,
While the shutters flap as the cross-wind blows,
And I turn the page, and I turn the page,
Not verse now, only prose!”

He imagines himself as being led back to Italy to “lean and love it over again.” There is exquisite description of a mountain gorge they had visited near Bagni di Lucca, then:

MEASURELESS CONTENT

"And all day long a bird sings there,
And a stray sheep drinks at the pond at times;
The place is silent and aware;
It has had its scenes, its joys and crimes,
But that is its own affair.

.

"With me youth led—I will speak now,
No longer watch you as you sit
Reading by fire-light, that great brow
And the spirit-small hand propping it,
Mutely, my heart knows how—

"When, if I think but deep enough,
You are wont to answer, prompt as rhyme;
And you too find without rebuff
Response your soul seeks many a time
Piercing its fine flesh-stuff.

"My own, confirm me! If I tread
This path back, is it not in pride
To think how little I dreamed it led
To an age so blest that, by its side,
Youth seems the waste instead?

.

"Oh moment, one and infinite!
The water slips o'er stock and stone;
The west is tender, hardly bright:
How grey at once is the evening grown—
One star, its chrysolite!

"We two stood there with never a third,
But each by each as each knew well:
The sights we saw and the sounds we heard,
The lights and shades made up a spell
Till the trouble grew and stirred.

"Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
And the little less, and what worlds away!
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
Or a breath suspend the blood's best play,
And life be a proof of this!

.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

"How the world is made for each of us!
How all we perceive and know in it
Tends to some moment's product thus,
When a soul declares itself—to wit,
By its fruit, the thing it does!

"Be hate that fruit or love that fruit,
It forwards the general deed of man,
And each of the Many helps to recruit
The life of the race by a general plan;
Each living his own to boot.

"I am named and known by that moment's feat;
There took my station and degree;
So grew my own small life complete,
As nature obtained her best of me—
One born to love you, sweet!

"And to watch you sink by the fireside now
Back again, as you mutely sit
Musing by firelight, that great brow
And the spirit-small hand propping it,
Yonder, my heart knows how!

"So earth has gained by one man the more,
And the gain of earth must be heaven's gain too;
And the whole is well worth thinking o'er
When autumn comes: which I mean to do
One day, as I said before."

Something of the same rapture he himself felt when he read the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* must have thrilled in the heart of Elizabeth Browning when she first read this poem and the superb dedication of *Men and Women* to herself in *One Word More*:

"There they are, my fifty men and women
Naming me the fifty poems finished!
Take them, Love, the book and me together:
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also."

He goes on to relate how Raphael wrote one hundred sonnets with the silver-pointed pencil "else he only used to

MEASURELESS CONTENT

draw Madonnas", just because he wanted to do something extraordinary for his lady love; how Dante once prepared to paint an angel for his Beatrice for that very same reason.

"What of Raphael's sonnets, Dante's picture?
This: no artist lives and loves that longs not
Once, and only once, and for one only,
(Ah, the prize!) to find his love a language
Fit and fair and simple and sufficient—
Using nature that's an art to others,
Not, this one time, art that's turned his nature.
Ay, of all the artists living, loving,
None but would forego his proper dowry,—
Does he paint? he fain would write a poem,—
Does he write? he fain would paint a picture,
Put to proof art alien to the artist's,
Once, and only once, and for one only,
So to be the man and leave the artist,
Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow.

.

"I shall never, in the years remaining,
Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,
Make you music that should all-express me;
So it seems: I stand on my attainment.
This of verse alone, one life allows me;
Verse and nothing else have I to give you.
Other heights in other lives, God willing:
All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love!

.

"God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures
Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her!

"This I say of me, but think of you, Love!
This to you—yourself my moon of poets!
Ah, but that's the world's side, there's the wonder,
Thus they see you, praise you, think they know you!
There, in turn, I stand with them and praise you—
Out of my own self, I dare to phrase it.
But the best is when I glide from out them,
Cross a step or two of dubious twilight,

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Come out on the other side, the novel
Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,
Where I hush and bless myself with silence.

"Oh, their Raphael of the dear Madonnas,
Oh, their Dante of the dread Inferno,
Wrote one song—and in my brain I sing it,
Drew one angel—borne, see, on my bosom!"

When the critics and even the general public failed to acclaim this superb collection immediately, Robert's good friend Carlyle gloomily declared:

"It is what they call 'unintelligibility!' That is a fact; you are dreadfully difficult to understand; and that is a sin. Admit the accusation; I testify to it. God knows I too understand very well what it is to be 'unintelligible' so called. It is the effort of a man with very much to say endeavoring to get it said in a not sordid or unworthy way to men who are at home chiefly in the sordid, the prosaic, inane and unworthy."

After this book appeared, Robert Browning rested his wings. He was living his poetry, thinking it, breathing it. During the six remaining years of their life together and for three years after the death of his wife the ground was lying fallow for the harvest. All his heart and mind was intent on giving his adored wife anxious, loving care, ever fearfully anticipating the moment when the struggle of his love to keep her on earth should no longer avail, and her "soul of fire" should wing its way from the fragile "shell of pearl".

In the spring of 1858 Elizabeth's powers of resistance fell low after an abnormally cold winter, and from then on they fought a losing battle, although neither admitted any premonitions to the other. However she did write to a friend in December of 1860: "I have had pain in looking into Penini's face lately—which you will understand."

In May of 1861 she wrote her last poem, *North and South*, to celebrate the visit of Hans Christian Andersen to Rome. In June she was attacked by a heavy bronchial cold which found her unable to resist its ravages. She saw her

MEASURELESS CONTENT

friends as usual and was so bright and cheerful that no one, least of all Robert or Elizabeth, believed the end was near. On June twenty-eighth, in fact, she seemed so much better when her husband carried her out on their terrace at Casa Guidi that she declared:

"There is no doubt that I shall soon recover," and his heart was cheered.

That evening as he sat beside her bed they made plans to leave soon for a summer holiday. When she fell into a troubled sleep, Robert still sat, holding her in his arms, his muscles rigid, only moving if she awoke for a moment to smile and drop off once more, her face against his shoulder.

"You *are* making an exaggerated case of it!" she exclaimed once with her old gaiety, and of this moment Robert wrote later:

"Then came what my heart will keep till I see her again and longer—the most perfect expression of her love for me within my whole knowledge of her."

He thrilled to her words and watched her face, young and beautiful in the light of early dawn. She moved closer in his arms.

"How do you feel?" he asked anxiously.

"Beautiful!" she murmured.

Then "God took her to Himself as you would lift a sleeping child from a dark, uneasy bed into your arms and the light."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning had gone on the Great Adventure—alone!

HARVEST

ROBERT BROWNING had great comfort in the tragic days which followed. What he had had, lived on; what she had been was now robed in immortality. Her gentle spirit walked ever by his side or his soared on high to find her where she fared. The shock of losing her had been largely discounted by the miracle of his having been able to call her back from death to walk by his side at all. For fifteen years he must have been saying to himself, "How long can I keep my angel with me?"

This does not mean that his grief and the shock of his life's readjustment were anything short of tremendous. He who had taken no thought for self for fifteen years, now had his very reason for existence snatched away. Fortunately he must be mother as well as father to the boy Pen; fortunately there was, until his own father's death in 1866, that companionable, sympathetic friend, Sarianna. The four from now on were drawn together by tightening cords until only the son, Robert Barrett Browning, was left behind.

In the hour of his great loss friends rallied around him as they laid what was mortal of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to rest in the lovely cypress-shaded English cemetery of Florence. Shortly afterward Robert Browning left forever that dearly loved city, now too poignantly shadowed, thus deliberately enshrining the happy memories of their years there together in his own heart where no future visit should ever confuse or sully in any way the perfection of the inward vision. Ten years later he wrote: "I never hear anyone speak of going to Florence but my heart is twitched." It was seventeen years before he could bear to return even to northern Italy, and then he confined his visits to Venice and Asolo where memories could not tear at his heart.

HARVEST

Shortly after his wife's death, Browning wrote that splendidly defiant challenge, *Prospice*:

"Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe;
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
Yet the strong man must go:
For the journey is done and the summit attained,
And the barriers fall,
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
The reward of it all.
I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last!
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forebore,
And bade me creep past.
No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness, and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the element's rage, the fiend voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!"

This battle cry of aspiration was written either during the two months he spent with his father and sister on the northern coast of France, or just after his arrival in London which was now to be his home for the most part during the remaining years of his life. Somewhere it is written that on his arrival he went to Marylebone Church and quite simply, without any self-consciousness, knelt and kissed the pavement where his wife's feet had rested when she came that September morning to bless his life.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

For two years in his need for readjustment Browning avoided society so far as possible. He wrote little but superintended editions of his wife's poems and his own, and did this in the spirit expressed in a letter to a friend: "The simple truth is that *she* was the poet and I the clever person by comparison. Remember her limited experience of all kinds and what she made of it. Remember on the other hand how my uninterrupted health and strength and practice with the world have helped me."

In 1864 he collected what poems he had written during the last nine years into a volume called, *Dramatis Personae*. It contained eighteen poems, some of them among the finest he ever wrote, notably *A Death in the Desert*, *Prospice*, *Abt Voglar*, and *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, the last two sounding the trumpet call of his invincible optimism.

A Death in the Desert records the reflections of the beloved disciple, John—his last words on earth—and through the lips of the aged man, Browning preaches his own religion of love:

"For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear,—believe the aged friend,—
Is just our chance of the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is."

In the end Saint John,

"Lies as he lay once, breast to breast with God."

In its subtle reasoning this poem makes us feel at times that Browning is trying, by his very insistence on love as the chief manifestation of God, to exorcise from his own heart the fear that there may be a God who is power without love.

Abt Vogler is one of the most superb tributes poetry has ever paid to music, her fellow art. The composer sits at the organ and philosophizes on the ecstasy of artistic creation. Each note of his music is to him a heart throb in life's high romance, and a religion which leans down to draw man's aspirations on high. Has the musical chord ever been more beautifully expressed than in these lines?—

HARVEST

"I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound,
but a star."

The musician has reared a lofty palace of music. It is gone, and his soul seeks comfort:

"Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable Name?
Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with hands!
What, have fear of change from thee who art ever the same?
Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy power expands?
There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;
The evil is null, is naught, is silence implying sound;
What was good shall be good, with for evil, so much good more;
On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect round.

"All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity confirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by and by.

"And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or agonized?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?
Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should be prized?
Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:
But God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear;
The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know."

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Rabbi Ben Ezra strikes the same note and we feel that in these three poems Browning is sharing with us much of the comfort his profound intellect has drawn from the universe as healing for the shock of his loss and grief of his soul. It is a poem of supreme imaginative splendor, a triumphant song of the intellectual and ethical joy of living, and should be read in its entirety rather than in brief quotation. But some stanzas are too fine for omission.

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, 'A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

"Not that, amassing flowers,
Youth sighed, 'Which rose make ours,
Which lily leave and then as best recall?'
Not that, admiring stars,
It yearned, 'Nor Jove nor Mars;
Mine be some figured flame which blends, transcends
them all!"

"Not for such hopes and fears
Annulling youth's brief years,
Do I remonstrate: folly wide the mark!
Rather I prize the doubt
Low kinds exist without,
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.

"Then welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joy three-parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

"For thence—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks,—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail?"

HARVEST

What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink in the scale.

.

"Therefore I summon age
To grant youth's heritage,
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:
Thence I shall pass approved
A man, for aye removed
From the developed brute; a God though in the germ.

"And I shall thereupon
Take rest, ere I be gone
Once more on my adventure brave and new:
Fearless and unperplexed,
When I wage battle next,
What weapons to select, what armor to indue.

.

"But I need now as then,
Thee, God, who moulded men;
And since, not even while the whirl was worst,
Did I—to the wheel of life
With shapes and colors rife
Bound dizzily—mistake my end, to slake thy thirst:

"So, take and use thy work:
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
My times are in thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!"

Thus old age is apotheosized as the pinnacle of attainment. Ardor, enthusiasm, poise, security, abandonment to the purpose of God—these are regarded as the consequences of a well-spent life and the assurance of a richer immortality. Death comes as a friend, opening a gate to a new and better adventure.

After the publication of *Dramatis Personae*, Browning turned once more to the story contained in the tattered old

POMPILIA AND HER POET

yellow book which had so fascinated him in Florence and which now was to hold him in engaging thralldom until it was incorporated into *The Ring and the Book* in 1868. Most of the poem was written in his new home on Warwick Crescent, London, where, so far as possible, he had reproduced Casa Guidi. Furniture, tapestries, books, and pictures were the same, and here, once more, he indulged his love for strange pets. Two weird grey geese hissed and fluttered to meet him whenever he stepped into the garden, and an owl became his adoring companion in the house, kissing his master, pulling his hair, following him contentedly from room to room, allowed almost every privilege except feasting upon manuscript. Close beside Browning's desk stood a chair so sacred that, lest some one should use it unawares, it was always kept piled high with books. It was the little low velvet-cushioned chair sacred to Mrs. Browning in Casa Guidi.

On Delamere Terrace a few doors away lived her favorite sister, Arabel Barrett, and Browning maintained a warm, affectionate, and very comforting friendship with her up to the time of her death. One day in July, 1863, she told him that she had dreamed of Elizabeth the night before and had asked her sister, "Dearest, when shall I be with you?" "In five years," came the answer, and exactly five years later Browning had the great sorrow of sitting by her side when she too fared forth into the Unknown. This severed his last link with the family of his wife.

The completion and publication of the formidable *magnum opus* created a literary sensation of first magnitude. Browning was for the most part extravagantly eulogized for a work so unique in plan and construction—a work which unquestionably marked the swing of the pendulum away from poetic romanticism to the elevation of every day actualities into verse.

The mere bulk of a poem of about twenty-two thousand lines from a great poet whose only contemporary ranking rival was Tennyson, made the publication impressive, but critics also instantly recognized the fact that the conception

HARVEST

of *The Ring and the Book* was unique and tremendous. Most thinking people find a good bit of fascination in studying the reactions of an audience, be it at a play or at a horse race or any other kind of gathering. This instinct explains the grip the stage and literature both have had on humanity throughout the ages. We want to know what other human beings think of this life of ours.

Browning as a profound student of human nature turns this instinct to good account, first of all by revealing the tragic drama which overwhelms innocent young Pompilia's life and, in less degree, the other lives involved with hers. But he does not stop with the actors on the stage. He goes on to show how her drama refracted on the audience of the Rome of that day. In stripping bare the hearts and souls of the actors and the judgments and sympathies of the spectators, and in inviting the reader to judge them all by their capacity to receive the messages of the spirit, since by this standard alone each human being must inevitably stand or fall—what else has Browning given us but one of the most tremendous conceptions in all literature?

Is his execution commensurate with that conception? Does execution ever quite measure up to the visions of those who create? Fortunately great souls and great artists are rated by their highest achievements, and generous humanity is very tolerant of their minor slips and flaws.

Judged with wide vision and allowing for all unevenness of detail, Browning's execution seems little short of marvellous. No poet ever lived who could write twenty-two thousand lines, each of which should be lofty verse. Did such a one exist, how bored we should be by his very perfection! In literature as in painting we must have chiaroscuro. Suppose it does take a rabid Browning devotee to feel any especial interest, let us say in the pleas of the lawyers; isn't that fact offset by the realization that few humans exist who would not experience a thrill over the inspired pleas of Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia? For ordinary people, and some not so ordinary, the poem might be more attractive if it consisted of the introduction, those three

POMPILIA AND HER POET

pleas, the Pope's superb monologue, and Guido's consummately brilliantly final defense—but why should we want to deprive the erudite of their caviar because we happen to be “general”?

When Carlyle ran into Browning shortly after his great work appeared, he offered his rather amusing congratulations: “It is a wonderful book, one of the most wonderful poems ever written. I re-read it all through—all made out of an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines and only wants forgetting.” Quite true, and as Carlyle undoubtedly realized, a tremendous compliment to the poet's power to breathe life into dry bones. Who but a consummate artist would find in the prosaic legal record of a sordid murder trial, a divinely given medium for sharing with the world that profound conviction which he now knew epitomized his life with Elizabeth Browning, namely, that spiritual love between man and woman may become so mighty, so all-compelling, that mere physical love shrivels to nothingness in its white flame? That had been his own epic; now he passed it on through the medium of these other lovers that all the world might vision and believe.

The love of Pompilia and Caponsacchi was a passionate ardor for the beauty of soul each recognized in the other, and their spiritual exultation was expressed by utter abandonment to the profound truth that by immolation of self, victory over time and death would be gained. Thus their love became a transfiguration. Pompilia sees her young priest a soldier-saint set apart to fight God's battles on earth; he bears her in his arms at the inn as reverently as if he were bearing the Host. To these young souls faith flashed instantly, intuitively, through passionate vision; to the splendid old Pope faith came as the outcome of a long life of righteousness and fidelity. This love, this faith should endure. On the earth the arcs might be broken; but “in heaven the perfect round!”

No poet can thus voice all that is great and fine and noble in himself as a man, and in himself as one who has known and loved a woman as rare and fine and brilliant as Eliza-

HARVEST

both Browning, without bringing what is rarest and best in the intellectual life of his day to his own door. From this time on Browning was practically doyen to the literary lights of England and America, and loved to keep open house for his especial friends. The critic, Edmund Gosse, gives us this picture of the poet as host to a congenial spirit:

"His private conversation was a very different thing from his talk over the dinner-table or in a picture gallery. It was a much finer phenomenon, and one which tallied far better with the noble breadth of his genius. To a single listener with whom he was on familiar terms, the Browning of his own study was to the Browning of a dinner party as a tiger is to a domestic cat. In such conversation his natural strength came out. His voice rose to a shout, sank to a whisper, ran up and down the gamut of conversational melody. Those whom he was expecting will never forget his welcome—the loud trumpet-note from the other end of the passage, the talk already in full flood at the distance of twenty feet. Then, in his own study or drawing-room, what he loved was to capture the visitor in a low arm chair and from a most unfair advantage of height to tyrannize, to walk around the victim weaving magic circles, now with gesticulating arms thrown high, now grovelling on the floor to find some reference in a folio, talking all the while—a redundant turmoil of thoughts, fancies, and reminiscences flowing from those generous lips. To think of it is to conjure up an image of intellectual vigor, armed at every point but overflowing, none the less, with geniality of strength."

Browning was hardly ever able to dine at home, so greatly was he in social demand. An anonymous writer in *The New Review* gives his impressions of the poet as a social lion:

"It may safely be alleged that no one meeting Mr. Browning for the first time and unfurnished with a clue, would guess his vocation. He might be a diplomatist, a statesman, a discoverer, or a man of science. But whatever were his calling, we should feel that it must be essentially practical. . . . His conversation corresponds to his appearance. It abounds in vigor, in fire, in vivacity. Yet all the time it

is entirely free from mystery, vagueness, or technical jargon. It is the crisp, emphatic, and powerful discourse of a man of the world, who is incomparably better informed than the mass of his congeners. Mr. Browning is the readiest, the blithest, and the most forcible of talkers. Like the Monsignore in *Lothair* he can 'sparkle with anecdote and blaze with repartee', and when he deals in criticism the edge of his sword is mercilessly whetted against pretension and vanity. The inflection of his voice, the flash of his eye, the pose of his head, the action of his hand, all lend special emphasis to the condemnation."

Probably one of the reasons for Browning's personal popularity was his exceptional power to live and talk entirely on the surface in all human contacts except with friends whom he trusted most deeply and loved the most. The world does not like and usually ridicules people who are too intense, too soulful, too enthusiastic, in short those who have no reserves. For this reason the clever man learns to wear protective armor over his passions. Browning's wife had shared all the richness of his soul, and after her death there were a few rare spirits to whom he gave the key to his treasure house. For the world at large, however, he was exquisitely courteous, affable, genial, even jovial, but beyond a certain point serenely aloof and self-contained. It was a *mot* in his day, "Tennyson hides behind his laurels; Browning behind the man of the world." Some of his friends have asserted that in reality his affability covered the shy nervousness which is often found in the better class of Englishmen in their social contacts.

Browning's friend William Sharp, brilliant essayist and himself a delightful poet under the pen name of Fiona MacLeod, speaks of Browning's activities:

"Everybody wished him to come to dine and he did his best to gratify Everybody. He saw everything; read all the notable books; kept himself acquainted with the leading contents of the journals and magazines; conducted a large correspondence; read new French, German, and Italian books of mark; read and translated Euripides and Aeschylus;

HARVEST

knew all the gossip of the literary clubs, salons, and the studios; was a frequenter of afternoon-tea parties; and then, over and above it, he was Browning: the most profoundly subtle mind that has exercised itself in poetry since Shakespeare."

One must add that he also found time for frequent trips to Scotland, France, Switzerland, and that at seventy he eagerly took up the study of Spanish and Hebrew, the latter language in order that he might read the Old Testament in the original.

Any contact with young people, any appreciation from them delighted his soul. The honors and titles heaped upon him by Cambridge, Oxford, and Edinburgh, gave him double pleasure because they opened out such contacts, and the affectionate cheers of the students touch him deeply. The children of his own friends he took to his heart as is shown in this charming note he wrote to a young friend.

"My beloved Alma,—

"I had the honor yesterday of dining with the Shah, whereupon the following dialogue:—

" 'Vous êtes poète?'

" 'On s'est permis de me le dire quelquefois.'

" 'Et vous avez fait des livres?'

" 'Trop de livres.'

" 'Voulez-vous m'en donner un, afin que je puisse me ressouvenir de vous?'

" 'Avec plaisir.'

"I have been accordingly this morning to town, where the thing is procurable, and as I chose a volume of which I judged the binding might take the imperial eye, I said to myself, 'Here do I present my poetry to a personage for whom I do not care three straws; why should I not venture to do as much for a young lady I love dearly, who, for the author's sake, will not impossibly care rather for the inside than the outside of the volume?' So I was bold enough to take one and offer it for your kind acceptance, begging you to remember in days to come that the author, whether a good poet or no, was always, my Alma, your affectionate friend,

ROBERT BROWNING."

POMPILIA AND HER POET

His relations with his fellow poet, Tennyson, were particularly delightful, as Tennyson's son bears witness in his biography of his father:

"Browning frequently dined with us and the tête-à-tête conversations between him and my father on every imaginable topic were the best talk I have ever heard, so full of repartee, epigram, anecdote, depth, and wisdom, too brilliant to be possible to reproduce. These brother poets were two of the most widely read men of their time, absolutely without a touch of jealousy, and reveling, as it were, in each other's power."

One of the last volumes of selections issued during Browning's lifetime bore this fine dedication:

"ALFRED TENNYSON

"In poetry—illustrious and consummate,

"In friendship—noble and sincere."

Even finer was the letter sent to his friend as a birthday greeting:

"My dear Tennyson,—Tomorrow is your birthday—indeed a memorable one. Let me say I associate myself with the universal pride of our country in your glory, and its hope that for many and many a year we may have your very self among us—secure that your poetry will be a wonder and delight to all those appointed to come after. And for my own part, let me further say, I have loved you dearly. May God bless you and yours!

"At no moment from the first to the last of my acquaintance with your works, or friendship, or yourself, have I had any other feeling, expressed or kept silent, than this which an opportunity allows me to utter—that I am and ever shall be, my dear Tennyson, admiringly and affectionately yours,

ROBERT BROWNING."

EVENING

FROM 1871 to 1889 Browning wrote and published a vast amount of poetry, much of it admirable, some of it superlatively musical and beautiful, but it is undeniable that the poet's hand was stiffening and that he often sought by craftsmanship to atone for the cooling of youthful spontaneity and enthusiasm. As James Russell Lowell said of Wordsworth, we feel sometimes as if the poet had gone out for a walk and the thrifty secretary who hated to see time wasted, had taken up the pen. Browning expressed the change he felt apparent by saying he found "much of it mere grey argument".

Certainly his so-called unintelligibility grew, but we must accept his insistence that this was wholly unintentional. He used to chuckle with delight when he was able to furnish an entirely simple explanation for something over which his readers had pored with despair. Once he did shake his head, then added with a twinkle in his eye: "I really don't know. Perhaps you would better refer it to the Browning society."

Possibly a great poet ought not to be too deeply learned, since the sheerest poetry, that most closely akin to music, contains the least thought. Intellectual and moral suasion, didacticism, are purely the province of prose, and, when given a metrical setting, too often remain—just prose; exalted perhaps, but short of the divine afflatus. The essence of poetry must be passion—passion in the poet of such frenzy that the reader takes flame and wings with him to the Empyrean. "Passion is noble strength on fire," asserts George Meredith, and poetical passion is passion for truth, for beauty, for the incomprehensible and unattainable. Rhythmic energy at work without rhythmic emotion must betray itself and be rated by what it inevitably lacks.

POMPILIA AND HER POET

Therefore one learns to love Browning for the poems that are not clogged up with excessive thought, and when one loves him enough, one goes on to read even the most abstruse product of his brain, knowing that he will be enriched by contact with this especial poet's superbly subtle mind.

Even the names of many of the poems of this period sound formidable: *Balaustion's Adventure*; *Aristophanes' Apology*; *Prince Hohenstiel-Swangau*, *Saviour of Society*; *Jocoseria*; *Ferishtah's Fancies*—one feels the need of pluck to tackle them. Poems like *Martin Relp*, *Pheidippides*, *Ivan Ivanovitch*, *Herve Riel*, however, ring with the sweep of his earlier narrative power.

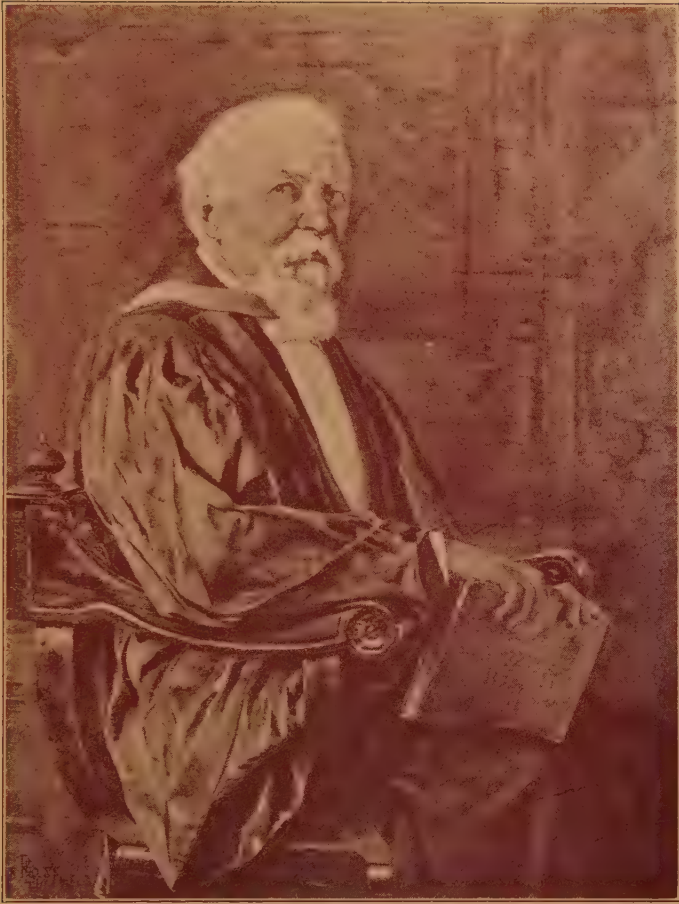
Fortunately there are scattered among these more formidable and esoteric poems, some exquisite lyrics such as the young Browning might have written. Even to the end passion did not die in this poet; it only rested, too tired to stay on the wing. One cannot associate age with *Wanting Is What?*:

"Wanting is—what?
Summer redundant,
Blueness abundant,
—Where is the blot?

Beamy the world, yet a blank all the same,
—Frame work that waits for a picture to frame:

What of the leafage, what of the flower?
Roses embowering with naught they embower!
Come then, complete incompleteness, O come,
Pant through the blueness, perfect the summer!

Breathe but one breath
Rose-beauty above,
And all that was death
Grows life, grows love,
Grows love!"



PORTRAIT OF ROBERT BROWNING with "THE OLD SQUARE YELLOW BOOK"
Painted by his son 1882

EVENING

Or again:

"Never the time and the place
And the loved one all together!
This path—how soft to pace!
This May—what magic weather!
Where is the loved one's face?
In a dream that loved one's face meets mine,
But the house is narrow, the place is bleak
Where, outside, rain and wind combine
With a furtive ear, if I strive to speak,
With a hostile eye at my flushing cheek,
With a malice that marks each word, each sign!
O enemy sly and serpentine,

Uncoil thee from the waking man!
Do I hold the Past
Thus firm and fast

Yet doubt if the Future hold I can?
This path so soft to pace shall lead
Through the magic of May to herself indeed!
Or narrow if needs the house must be,
Outside are storms and strangers: we—
Oh, close, safe, warm, sleep I and she,
— I and she!"

Even more perfect is the prologue to *Two Poets of Croisic*:

"Such a starved bank of moss
Till, that May morn,
Blue ran the flash across:
Violets were born.

"Sky—what a scowl of cloud
Till, near and far,
Ray on ray split the shroud:
Splendid, a star!

"World—how it walled about
Life with disgrace,
Till God's own smile came out:
That was thy face!"

POMPILIA AND HER POET

The epilogue to this poem is a fascinating lyric. The musician, playing his lute in a prize contest, is suddenly disconcerted by the breaking of his f sharp string. What shall he do when he needs that note? But a little cricket—

“For mere love of music—flew
With its little heart on fire,
Lighted on the crippled lyre.

“So that when (Ah, joy!) our singer
For his truant string
Feels with disconcerted finger,
What does cricket else but fling
Fiery heart forth, sound the note
Wanted by the throbbing throat?

“Ay, and ever to the ending,
Cricket chirps at need,
Executes the hand’s intending,
Promptly, perfectly,—indeed
Saves the singer from defeat
With her chirrup low and sweet.”

In the end the girl who tells the story reminds the poet:

“..... All I care for
Is to tell him that a girl’s
Love comes aptly in when gruff
Grows his singing. (There, enough!)”

Many of his later poems ring with his undaunted optimism, as, for instance, *At the “Mermaid,”* especially in these lines:

“Have you found your life distasteful?
My life did and does smack sweet.
Was your youth of pleasure wasteful?
Mine I saved and hold complete.
Do your joys with age diminish?
When mine fail me, I’ll complain.
Must in death your daylight finish?
My sun sets to rise again.

EVENING

"I find earth not grey, but rosy,
Heaven not grim but fair of hue.
Do I stoop? I pluck a posy.
Do I stand and stare? All's blue."

His splendid scorn for those who sell their souls for the material profits and anxieties of life rings defiantly from *Shop*:

"Because a man has shop to mind
In time and place, since flesh must live,
Need spirit lack all life behind,
All stray thoughts, fancies fugitive,
All loves except what trade can give?"

"I want to know a butcher paints,
A baker rhymes for his pursuit,
Candlestick-maker much acquaints
His soul with song, or, haply mute,
Blows out his brains upon the flute!"

"But—shop each day and all day long!
Friend, your good angel slept, your star
Suffered eclipse, fate did you wrong!
From where these sorts of treasures are,
There should our hearts be—Christ, how far!"

During these years of many varied contacts, Browning's chief joy was in his son and in guiding him, so far as lay in his power, toward a gifted career as painter and sculptor. He once confessed to a friend that he would gladly blot out of existence every line he had ever written if by so doing he might add to his son's power and attainments. In this we once more recognize the selflessness of his capacity for love. Instinctively he passed on to her son the same unself-conscious devotion which had animated his union with the mother.

Whenever it would not interfere with Pen's education, the boy accompanied his father and aunt on their many excursions to France, Switzerland, and Scotland. After the boy began studying with Rodin and had entries in the Salon and the London exhibitions, Browning's delight was greater

than any he ever experienced from fame or praise heaped on himself. In 1882 when Oxford conferred on him the degree of D.C.L. and he was jovially and enthusiastically acclaimed by the students, his real joy came from the fact that Pen painted him in his red robes, holding in his hand "the old square yellow book", and that this portrait became the treasured possession of Balliol Hall.

After Browning's death his son presented the Book also to Balliol, and like his father before him wore his mother's ring, fashioned by Castellani, on his watch chain. When he died his wife saw to it that the Ring should join the Book in the library of Balliol College.

It is gratifying to know that Robert Barrett Browning returned this affection in full measure. Miss Lillian Whiting who knew him in later years tells us:

"The poetry of the elder Browning has no more critically appreciative reader than his son. Some volume of his father's is always at hand in his travelling; and he, like all Browning lovers, can never open any volume of Robert Browning's without finding revealed to him new vistas of thought, renewed aspiration and resolve for all noble living, and infinite suggestiveness of spiritual achievement."

At last, in 1878, Browning felt he could bear to go back to his beloved Italy, but only to the northern section where he would not be harrowed by too poignant memories. With Sarianna he spent the summer in Venice and Asolo, the rocky little town perched high in the hills which he had visited forty years before and immortalized in *Pippa Passes*. Here he formed some close new friendships and rapturously enjoyed long mountain tramps, or in Venice milder walks along the Lido—which he mightn't have liked at all as it is today! Thereafter he and his sister revisited Venice nearly every year.

As America had been the first to acclaim the poetry of the Brownings, so she was the first to incorporate this enthusiasm into a group of cultured people who should meet regularly for the purpose of reading and studying Robert Browning's poetry. The first "Browning Society" was in-

EVENING

augurated at Cornell University under the able leadership of Dr. Hiram Corson, professor of literature and very able critic and writer. He travelled through the United States, giving lectures and readings from the poet. Four or five years later similar societies sprang up at the centers of learning in England and "Browning Societies" still flourish in both countries.

Dr. Corson wrote to Browning of his work and this opened a delightful correspondence between the two men. In 1881 the new American friend called at Warwick Crescent to cement the friendship. Browning took him right into his heart, showed him many of his treasures, and talked of intimate things with the open frankness he reserved for only the chosen few. This friendship continued close and warm till the poet's death and to Dr. Corson we owe much of our best criticism and some of the most vivid personal reminiscences of the poet.

On Browning's seventieth birthday several Browning Societies presented him with a complete set of his own works, bound in olive green morocco and in a beautifully carved oak case, with this delightful inscription:

"To Robert Browning on his seventieth birthday, May 7th, 1882, from some members of the Browning Societies. These members having ascertained that the works of a Great Modern Poet are never in Robert Browning's house, beg him to accept a set of these works which they assure him will be found worthy of his most serious attention."

In 1885 his son joined Browning in Venice for the first time and became so infatuated with "the peerless bride of the sea" that he made it his home after marrying Miss Coddington of New York in 1887. He purchased Rezzonico Palace on the Grand Canal and changed it into a shrine filled with beautiful and touching mementoes of his father and mother. This remained his home until 1906 when he sold the palace and bought Casa Guidi and a villa called "La Torre all'Antella" in Florence, thus bringing himself

POMPILIA AND HER POET

nearer to his cherished dead. Those who knew him considered him a choice spirit who had inherited great gifts and spiritual vision from his rare parentage.

In 1887 Robert Browning seems to have had the impulse to start life anew. He purchased an attractive house in De Vere Gardens, London, and proceeded to fill it with beautiful souvenirs and antiques. Then he set out to find a home in Asolo, now far more alluring to him than when he first visited it, and there, during the summer of 1889, he wrote and assembled his latest poems, thirty of them, and named the book *Asolando*.

The Prologue is instinct with the sorrow of the lover of life forced on in the march of unrelenting years:

"The Poet's age is sad: for why?

In youth the natural world could show
No common object but his eye
At once involved with alien glow—
His own soul's iris-bow.

"And now a flower is just a flower:

Man, bird, beast are but beast, bird, man—
Simply themselves, uncinct by dower
Of dies which, when life's day began,
Round each in glory ran.

.

"And now? The lambent flame is—where?

Lost from the naked world: earth, sky,
Hill, vale, tree, flower,—Italia's rare
O'er-running beauty crowds the eye—
But flame? The Bush is bare."

In *Summum Bonum* we find the old lyric touch:

"All the breath and the bloom of the year in the
bag of one bee:
All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the
heart of one gem:
In the core of one pearl all the shade and the
shine of the sea;

EVENING

Breath and bloom, shade and shine,—wonder,
wealth, and—how far above them—
Truth, that's brighter than gem,
Trust, that's purer than pearl,—
Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe—
all were for me
In the kiss of one girl."

Muckle-Mouth Meg shows Browning is still capable of writing delightful comedy, and *Reverie* contains noble reflections on the subject which had always puzzled him, manifestations on earth which show God's power and seem to deny Him love. Again he concludes:

"Then life is—to wake not sleep,
Rise and not rest, but press
From earth's level where blindly creep
Things perfected, more or less,
To the heaven's height, far and steep,

"Where, amid what strifes and storms
May wait the adventurous quest,
Power is Love—transports, transforms
Who aspired from worst to best,
Sought the soul's world, spurned the worms'.

"I have faith such end shall be:
From the first, Power was—I knew.
Life has made clear to me
That, strive but for closer view,
Love were as plain to see.

"When see? When there dawns a day,
If not on the homely earth,
Then yonder, worlds away,
Where the strange and new have birth,
And Power comes full in play."

The Epilogue needs no apology, no kind-hearted praise. It stands out as the starkly beautiful last war-cry of a sturdy and valiant warrior. About two weeks before his death when Browning was correcting the proof sheets of *Asolando*, he

POMPILIA AND HER POET

read some of the poems to his son's wife. At last he began the *Epilogue*:

"At the midnight in the silence of the sleep-time,
When you set your fancies free,
Will they pass to where—by death, fools think,
imprisoned—
Low he lies who once so loved you, whom
you loved so,
—Pity me?

"Oh to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken!
What had I on earth to do
With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?
Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivell
—Being—who?

Here he paused, and sat meditating for a moment, then said quietly:

"Now what I have said here may sound conceited, but I think I can honestly say it is true."

"One who never turned his back but marched
breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong
would triumph;
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep, to wake.

"No, at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time
Greet the unseen with a cheer!
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be;
'Strive and thrive!' cry 'Speed,—fight
on, fare ever
There as here!' "

To Asolo in October came his friends for forty years, the sculptor Story and his wife. They found the poet "well, and as brilliant and delightful as ever." Also when he reached Venice in November and settled down for the winter in Pen's Rezzonico Palace, he was most agreeably surprised to find Dr. and Mrs. Corson enjoying a vacation close by. The poet took up his regular routine, and Dr.

EVENING

Corson was his frequent walking companion for the daily two hours. He frankly admitted that he had to quicken his step to keep up with Browning, whether they were on the long stretch of Lido sands or,

"Where St. Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed
the sea with rings."

Of course some of these walks were directed to the Public Gardens where the poet had many friends,—an elephant, a baboon, an ostrich, the kangaroo, and some marmosets and pelicans. He called out cheerily to the Corsons when they left Venice: "Be sure to visit me next May in London in De Vere Gardens!" They did not dream it was the last time they should see their friend.

Browning had given much thought to the trio of mysteries, life, death, immortality. His poems and recorded talks with his friends bear witness that he shared the absorbing interest every thoughtful person must feel in the why, and how, and whence of human living. Once he said to William Sharp with great earnestness:

"Death, death! It is this harping on death that I despise so much, this idle and often cowardly as well as ignorant harping. Why should we not change like everything else? . . . Why, amico mio, you know as well as I that death is life, just as our daily, our momentarily dying body is none the less alive and ever recruiting new forces of existence. Without death, which is our crapelike, churchyardy word for change, for growth, there could be no prolongation of that which we call life. Pshaw! It is foolish even to argue upon such a thing. For myself I deny death as the end of everything. Never say of me that I am dead!"

Certainly during these last weeks he had no idea that he was soon to know all that can be known about the great change. He confided to a friend that his mind was busy with a tragedy which he hoped to make better than anything else he had ever written. Also one evening when dining with an English doctor he put out his wrist confidently to prove how exceptionally well he was. The doctor did

POMPILIA AND HER POET

not tell him differently, but he recognized the heart weakness which had been gradually making headway for some time.

One afternoon late in November, Browning returned from his two hours on the Lido with symptoms of a bad bronchial cold. It was not until December first that he allowed an Italian doctor to be summoned, and submitted to being sent to bed. The heart weakness increased but he remained bright and cheerful, sure to the last he would recover.

On Thursday the twelfth of December, 1889, his book *Asolando* was published in England. That evening when his dear ones were anxiously watching about his bedside, he aroused himself to ask if there had been any news. His son read him the telegram which had just arrived from the publisher:

"Reviews in all this day's papers most favorable, edition nearly exhausted." Browning murmured:

"How gratifying!"

The great bell of Saint Mark's tolled out the hour of ten, and as the last stroke sounded the soul of the poet went out to—

" pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!"

On the outside wall of Rezzonico Palace is an inscription recording the fact of his death and quoting two lines from *De Gustibus*:

"Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it, 'Italy'."

EVENING

Browning had said that when he died he wished to be buried where he fell, and Italy was anxious to keep him there. The Florentine cemetery was closed, and before efforts were under way to see if it might be opened so he might lie beside his wife, a burial in Westminster Abbey was urged for them both. Mr. Robert Barrett Browning, knowing his father's wishes, declined for his mother but accepted for his father. Let Mr. William Sharp tell the story as he wrote it down shortly afterward:

"The superb pomp of the Venetian funeral, the solemn grandeur of the interment in Westminster Abbey, do not seem worth recording: so insignificant are all these accidents of death made by the supreme fact itself. Yet it is fitting to know that Venice in modern times has never afforded a more impressive sight than those craped processional gondolas following the high flower-strewn funeral-barge through the thronged water-ways and out across the lagoon to the desolate Isle of the Dead: that London has rarely seen aught more solemn than the fog-dusked Cathedral spaces, echoing at first with the slow tramp of the pall-bearers, and then with the sweet aerial music swaying upward the loved familiar words of the 'Lyric Voice' hushed so long before. Yet the poet was as much honored by those humble friends, Lambeth artisans and a few poor working-women who threw sprays of laurel before the hearse—by that desolate, starving, woe-weary gentleman, shivering in his threadbare clothes, who seemed transfixed with a heart-wrung though silent emotion, ere he hurriedly drew from his sleeve a large white chrysanthemum, and throwing it beneath the coffin as it was lifted inward, disappeared in the crowd which closed again like the sea upon this lost wandering wave."

The great of the land were there to honor their mighty dead, to join with the choir in singing, "He giveth His beloved sleep!" They laid him at the foot of Chaucer's tomb in the Poet's Corner where three years later Tennyson came to rest by his side. No one who has known and loved these poets can stand by these graves unmoved. Just the names

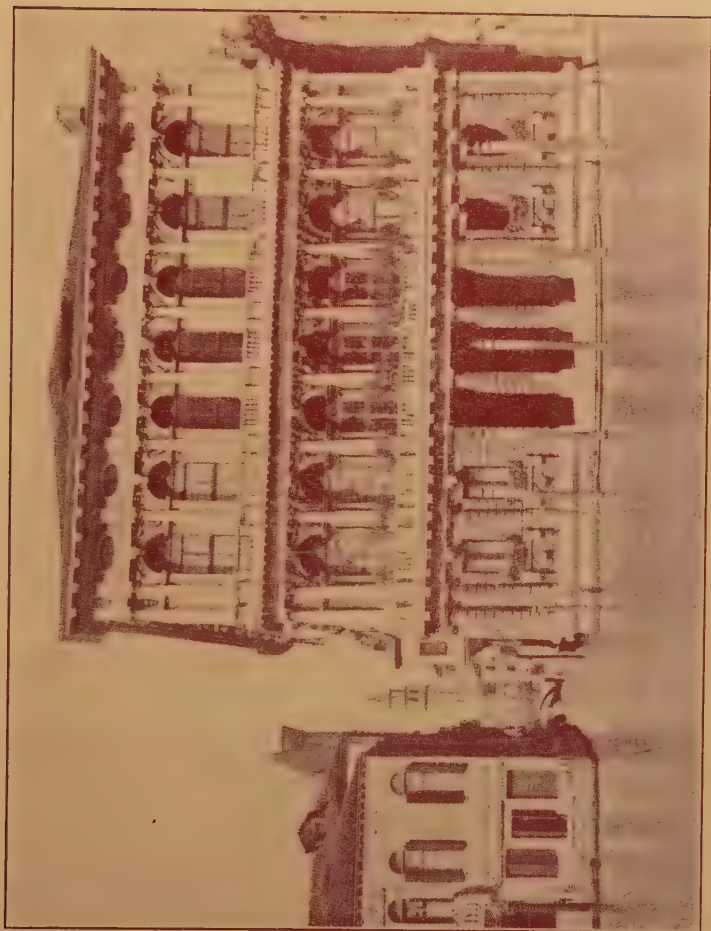
POMPILIA AND HER POET

and the dates mark the spot, but underneath the grey stone
and the red Italian marble slab rests what was mortal of
friends who have been the wings on which we have risen
to "love the highest when we see it"; to—

"Hold on, hope hard in the subtle thing
That's spirit: though cloistered fast, soar free!"

What words could better express our emotions over
Browning's grave than his own homage of half a century
before to Percy Bysshe Shelley?

"Sun-treader, life and light be thine forever!
Thou are gone from us; years go by and spring
Gladdens and the young earth is beautiful,
Yet thy songs come not; other bards arise
But none like thee: they stand, thy majesties,
Like mighty works which tell some spirit there
Hath sat regardless of neglect and scorn,
Till, its long task completed, it hath risen
And left us, never to return."



PALAZZO REZZONICO, GRAND CANAL, VENICE

FINIS CORONAT OPUS

THE forty years which have passed since Browning's death are hardly sufficient for forming a final judgment as to how he will ultimately rank in the poetical hierarchy. They have been stupendous, bewildering years of material inventions and material achievement. The bulk and mass of mankind have been trying breathlessly to keep up with each day's events. Therefore we have had no such time or inclination as was known in the Victorian era for quiet, thoughtful turning aside to that realm of the spirit where poets must dwell. Beauty has meant to us the wonder of machinery, of harnessing the waves of the air to perform man's puny will, the wonder of an Edison or a Lindbergh—just the sort of thing which the rugged, gritty Browning would have loved to sing!

However, there will always be students, always be the poets who write and who don't write. Is this poet of the last century going to be vital to them, going to give them sustenance and inspiration? Were his subjects and his treatment of those subjects sufficiently fundamental and outstanding to endure so long as English poetry shall be read?

We have not dwelt to any great extent on Browning's philosophy which caused a furor in his own day because he was so far in advance of his time. For instance, in many of his poems he deals with the doctrine of the sub-self as the source of the highest spiritual knowledge. To most of his readers this was an entirely new thought; today we are even flippant about complexes and the subconscious. Just so his rebellions and didactics which startled his own world seem to us mild commonplaces, so entirely have we passed beyond them chronologically. This is the usual fate of pioneers.

So it is not as philosopher but as poet we wish to judge Robert Browning. Did he clothe the verities of life with a

POMPILIA AND HER POET

light, a majesty, and a beauty that must endure? We have said that his genius was essentially dramatic—has he given his brain children flesh and blood, frailties and majesties, the touch with every day life that rings true? Do we want to know them, analyze them, live in the house with them, hate them, take them to our hearts forever? Let us see!

Shakespeare and Browning, each for his own day, rang all the changes on that high theme,—the grandeur of the human soul in all its intricate manifestations and manifold experiences. The value of their work lay in the fact that each did exactly the work he liked best and could not help doing. There is, however, this difference. If Shakespeare believed in the divine mission of poetry, he managed to conceal that belief by making us feel that his most inspired utterances are the most unconscious. This later poet, however, is a prophet who feels that he has a message to utter and that poetry is the medium through which it must reach the world. That message which throbs through all his work from *Pauline* to the *Epilogue* of *Asolando* is the grandeur of the human soul and its awful possibilities for "that terrible choice" between good and evil. It is a masculine message, strong, rugged, assertive—inspiring confidence in the conclusions reached by the heart and brain of this master of feeling and thought.

Browning is like Shakespeare in the intensity with which he throws his own individuality into the most varied of characters; in not being an inventor or teacher of creeds or modes of life, but in depicting human life as he finds it; like him, too, in his all-timeness, showing us that the man of his day was only the man of a thousand years back under different influences of time, climate, and environment. In knowledge Browning was inevitably superior to Shakespeare, since he was the all-receptive child of an age two centuries and a half later which had profited by all that had gone before. In voluminousness he resembles the Elizabethan, for his works are a literature in themselves whose only limit is the limit of the soul and the end of human life. In fine, the fact that Shakespeare is the only poet with

whom Browning has ever been exhaustively compared, is a fact that speaks for itself.

In studying Browning we need to remember that he is an artist and sees, feels, and writes as an artist, painting us pictures, telling us stories, showing us man as he is, good, bad, and indifferent. At the same time he is far more subjective than Shakespeare. We feel him behind his characters, making them say what of themselves they could not say; always, however, just what Browning feels God sees in their hearts, what they would say had they the poet's power of utterance. Full, rich soliloquy falls from the lips of the little silk-mill girl, and to Browning's conception there is nothing incongruous in that fact for it is all in her heart—her lips only are dumb. Must not the poet be the voice for such as she?

In his marvellous gallery he pictures the most repulsive of sinners and the most exalted of saints, as well as every possible phase and stage between the two, and he gives the reason in his half-apology for Bluphocks: "He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." As with Terence of old, nothing human is alien to this nineteenth century dramatist, and we might add, nothing in all life, animate or inanimate. His intense vitality goes into every character he depicts, and what lessons we draw are inferred from their daily round rather than from any attempt on their part or his to preach to us. When we have finished and closed the book, however, we know instinctively the message of Browning the man. The same skillful pen depicts black-hearted Guido, the engaging scoundrel of *My Last Duchess*, the noble Abt Vogler, the undaunted Childe Roland, one as indelibly as any other, but we know it was the optimism, the courage, the fine decency that found their answering echo in the poet's heart.

We have spoken before of the fact that Browning never meant to be obscure. Like his wife he valued thought more than expression, matter more than form. To such an extent was this true that there are times when they positively are

POMPILIA AND HER POET

not at home in the medium they have chosen. Then while Browning was unquestionably more crammed with learning, useful and otherwise, than any other man of his time, he was unconscious of this fact. He thinks with lightning speed and down goes the thought in such condense shape that any ordinary reader, lacking the poet's intuition and this especial poet's power of sinewy thought, finds it a labyrinthine maze. Then, too, he aims so often to express the inexpressible, something too shadowy and fluctuating for us to grasp, yet one who has reached a certain stage of appreciation is contented to plod on and get what he can, sure that after a time he will comprehend more and be repaid. It is only the impatient and the ignorant who are quick to sneer at the new or the uncomprehended.

Rugged and rough much of his verse is, but this is deliberate. When the thought requires delicate beauty we have seen how capable he is of sheer music, but for the rugged, the rough-hewn, his powerful masculinity finds fit expression only in dynamic words,—and so melody is sacrificed. Both the Brownings show a curious unwillingness to keep on till they find the appropriate word, so one that jars on the reader will often be encountered. At times we must admit Browning lacks appreciation of that delicate boundary between good and bad taste, and shows a disregard for artistic restrictions. However, when we have said these things, we have said about all. So great a thinker as he is has the right to make extraordinary demands on our power of attention and application. As old Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare: "Hee redeemed his vices with his virtues: there was ever more in him to bee praysed than to bee pardoned."

The poems which most influence the thoughts and actions of men are those which are most incomplete. The reader feels that a deep undercurrent of thought must have passed through the poet's mind before a word was written, and he is stimulated to discover that thought for himself. To the student there is always fascination in seeing what lies around the next corner. Such incomplete poems as

Waring and *Childe Roland* offer a wide range for the individuality of each interpreter, and what does it matter if the interpretation be not that which was in the mind of the poet? A young man once came to Browning and said that his interpretation of a certain poem had been challenged and he would be glad if the poet would assure him it was correct. Browning listened attentively, and then thanked him cordially for a new thought he was pleased that he had quite unconsciously expressed. If we sometimes close the pages of this poet with discouragement, sometimes with a really complacent sense of victory won in an intellectual battle, isn't it worth while to have had our eyes opened to heights yet to be attained of which we had no thought when we sat down to read?

The productive soil of Mother Nature will have to lie fallow for some time before she can give us again such a rich crop of creative artists as she yielded in the last century. One year after Browning saw the light in England, Wagner was born in Germany, and it pleased critics of their time to dub Browning "the Wagner of poetry". It would be quite as apt to call Wagner the Browning of music. It would seem that a special age-thought, panting for utterance, found expression in these two men. In the heyday of their careers they met lack of appreciation, ridicule, scoffing, envy; then shortly after their deaths men declared that in them music and poetry had reached their height. Certainly the strong, wierd, incomprehensible harmonies of Wagner, those masterly complex strains which have the power to make you feel life too full for utterance, find their counterpart in those other wonderful harmonies of human souls bared to our gaze by the English master. In the compositions of both, the element we feel most strongly is a strength we could not long endure. Nor could the artists themselves endure it for long, for they and we find relief in inexpressibly sweet strains of tenderness, of beauty, and serenity. In both the conception is always noble and sublime; both win and hold their lovers enduringly. We come from an opera of Wagner's and we close a book of Browning's

POMPILIA AND HER POET

poems overwhelmed by a sense of life's intensity, its mysteries, its responsibility; awed but inspired, lifted from crudities and pettiness into a desire to know the everlasting verities of the universe.

Henry James sums up Robert Browning's work in these words:

"His voice sounds loudest and also clearest for the things that as a race we like best; . . . the fascination of faith, the acceptance of life, the respect for its mysteries, the endurance of its changes, the vitality of the will, the validity of character, the beauty of action, the seriousness, above all, of great human passion."

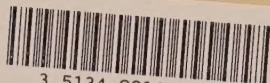
Yes, his themes are love, faith, hope, aspiration, courage, progress, and the will to battle for them all and for that something which lies just beyond them, something as yet inexplicable and unattainable. Robert Browning lived his best poem, and his life and his life work seem to those who love him, adamant sunshine. Because he loved life so richly, so madly that he could not credit the possibility of not living on after the Great Change, he has left the world bright with his abiding presence and the beauty of his dreams.



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